Continuity and Reform:

A Case Study Analysis of Assessment in Irish Post-primary Education through the Evaluation of Stakeholder Perceptions

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Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) **2021**

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Thesis submitted for the Award of PhD.

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December, 2020.

Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of PhD is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

Signed:  (Candidate)

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Date: 14th December 2020

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Acronyms

AGMS Adult Guidance Management System

CAO Central Applications Office

CARPE Centre for Assessment Research Policy and Practice in Education

CAT4 Cognitive Abilities Test 4th Edition

CBA Classroom-based assessment

COMPASS The National Association of Compass-Cooperation of Minority Religion and Protestant Parent Associations (Post-primary)

CPD Continuous professional development

CSO Central Statistics Office

CSPE Civic, Social and Political Education

CSPPA Catholic Secondary Schools Parent Associations

DCU Dublin City University

DDLETB Dublin and Dun Laoghaire Education and Training Board

DEIS Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

DES Department of Education and Skills (Ireland)

DIT Dublin Institute of Technology

DOTS Drumcondra Online Testing System

ECSC European Coal and Steel Community

ERC Educational Research Centre

ESRI Economic and Social Research Institute

ETBsNPA Education and Training Boards Schools National Parent Associations

EU European Union

GDPR General Data Protection Regulation

GOI Government of Ireland

GUI Growing Up in Ireland

HEA Higher Education Authority

HEI Higher Education Institutions

ICT Information and Communication Technology

IEA International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement

INTO Irish National Teachers Organisation

JCPA Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement

JCSP Junior Certificate School Programme

LCA Leaving Certificate Applied

LCVP Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

NCCA National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NEPS National Educational Psychological Service

NPCPP National Parents Council Post-primary

NPR National percentage rank

NUIG National University of Ireland, Galway

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OFSTED Office of Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (UK)

PA Parent Association

PACCS Parents Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools

PDST Professional Development Service for Teachers

PISA Programme for International Student Assessment

SAS Standard Age Score

SEC State Exams Commission

SEN Special educational needs

SPHE Social Personal and Health Education

SSE School Self-evaluation

ST Stanine

TALIS Teaching and Learning International Study

TCD Trinity College Dublin

TY Transition Year

UCC University College Cork

UCD University College Dublin

UNCRC United Nations Convention/Charter on the Rights of the Child

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund

USI Union of Students in Ireland

VAM Value-added Modelling

WSE Whole-school evaluation

WSE-MLL Whole-school evaluation, management, leadership, and learning

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Abstract

Continuity and Reform: A Case Study Analysis of Assessment in Irish Post-primary Education through the Evaluation of Stakeholder Perceptions

PhD research undertaken by Carol Guildea

This research procures and analyses the perspectives of parents and students, regarding post-primary assessments. Two specific events prompted this research:

> 1. The reform of Junior Cycle Assessment in 2015 involving systematic reform to include the assessment of skills and competencies required for 21st century living (DES, 2012a; NCCA, 2017).
>
> 2. An Inspectorate report following a Whole School Evaluation, recommending summative data from the school entrance assessments be utilised to 'provide a more realistic perspective on student performance.' (DES, 2016e, p.3).

The two events highlighted reform of assessment towards the formative at Junior Cycle with a simultaneous focus on summative student performance within the post-primary system.

The researcher was keen to establish parent and student perspectives to assessment in post-primary education to ascertain how they as primary stakeholders experienced all aspects of the system. Subsequent to an extensive literature review, the following research questions were identified:

- What is the perception of post-primary assessment among students and parents in a case study school in Ireland during a period of simultaneous continuity and reform?
- What are the benefits of assessment within a post-primary school?
- What are the challenges of assessment within a post-primary school?

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data resulted in the emergence of three interlinked themes:

- Stakeholders perceive assessment through the purpose of the assessment
- Stakeholders perceive assessment through the culture of assessment
- Stakeholders perceive post-primary assessment has an impact on student wellbeing.

Each of the three themes are discussed in relation to the research questions and conclusions and recommendations for the case study school, for national policymakers and for future research in the area are identified.

Acknowledgements

My father, Brendan.
A passionate man where education is concerned, assessment in particular.
My father is the light that lights the way.
Forever indebted to you, on all fronts, Dad.

My love, Dan.
A passionate man where work is concerned, dedication in particular.
My love has taught me the great value of patience, in my action-filled world.
This research was borne out of our shared circumstance.

My friend, Claire.
A touchstone, at those critical times.
Every step of the way, and beyond.
A strong and brilliant woman, an actual real-life gem.

My supervisors, Gerry, and Martin.
The quals and the quants.
Without you, there would be no words, literally.

My system of education and assessment in Ireland.
The journey.
Evolution.

My work, this production, in particular.
A true companion, of tremendous personal value.
I now offer it up, for assessment.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction to this research

This research explores assessment within the Irish post-primary education system at a key time: a time when the system of assessment at Junior Cycle was under incremental reform and the Senior Cycle was under review but continued as established. This research provides an analysis of assessment in post-primary education in Ireland through the evaluation of stakeholder perspectives. This introductory chapter outlines the research by firstly presenting the contemporary Irish educational context as it is located within a wider global arena. The evolution of the Irish post-primary system of assessment is then described in conjunction with assessment policies globally and nationally. Following the introduction of the wider context of education and relevant policy, a rationale for this research is presented. Finally, the methodology utilised for the research is then introduced before the specific research questions framing this research are outlined.

1.2 The Irish education system within a global context

This section introduces the Irish post-primary system of education in order to provide context for further discussion on assessment and stakeholder voice within the system. This section situates Irish education policy amongst global education policy developments. In order to achieve this, a summary of key developments on a global scale at the beginning of the 21st century is outlined. A brief description of the Irish education system as a system operating within this global context is then presented. The proportion of Irish citizens engaging with the system of education is discussed in order to demonstrate the extent of the experience and potential breadth and impact of the Irish post-primary system on individuals and on society at large. Hence, it is vitally important that research in the area of stakeholder perspectives be carried out on all aspects of education. In this case, an analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education through the evaluation of stakeholder perspectives is presented.

1.2.1 Globalisation and 21st century education

This section contextualises the Irish education system within a contemporary global context. In order to discuss global developments in education, 'globalisation' as a concept and as a process must be considered. Globalisation is a complex phenomenon (Rennen and Martens, 2003). It is a process which actively or passively engages nations around

the world in an interconnected evolution of productivity, competition and consumption. Although the United Nations became established in 1945, there is general consensus that the era of globalisation intensified in the 1970s, when a sharp increase in international economic flow began to transform the world (Clegg et al., 2003; Kocmanová, 2007). Clegg et al. (2003) propose that globalisation has had a significant effect on global economics, and this, in turn, has affected political strategy on a national level, leading to industrial and educational restructuring worldwide. Hence, globalisation had a significant and direct impact on nation states all over the world. This subsequently impacted international systems of education, the system within which people are educated and trained as global citizens and as resources for industry (Kocmanová, 2007; Rennen and Martens, 2003; Zajda, 2018). The challenge for education systems is to educate a workforce in a manner which is appropriate to the ever-changing needs of industry (Nusche, 2018). Today, it is necessary to produce skilled workers who will meet the needs of the knowledge economy, with an emphasis on collaboration, communication, creativity and critical thinking skills (Battelle For Kids, 2019). It is contended that globalisation impacts upon and inevitably redefines the fundamental aims and function of education systems, inducing significant change in every nation for every citizen.

One might ask, what is the purpose of education for each citizen within this global system? The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) proposes that the development of a transferrable skill-set for economic flexibility and endowing upon each citizen a sense of responsibility in the context of 21st-century global society is key for systems of education (OECD, 2018a, 2018b). Individuals in the modern global economy must, therefore, in the view of the OECD, develop a capacity for adaptation, innovation, creativity and self-motivation. It must be noted that these are not essentially academic skills; they are more akin to competencies or characteristics (ibid). The development of competencies and characteristics is therefore important where 21st-century education systems are concerned. However, the OECD also outlines that individuals generally consider one's level of education to correlate with one's ability to earn money (Pina, 2011). Hence, it is argued that while education is vital for the development of skills for the labour force at a systemic level, it is also important at the level of the individual in the 21st century. As such, systems of education are concerned with the learning and development of an individual and groups of individuals (Ball, 2016; Kellaghan et al., 2004).

1.2.2 Ireland and 21st century education

This section addresses the Irish approach and summarises the development of the Irish education system, which has evolved since the foundation of the state of the Republic of Ireland almost 100 years ago. In 1922, post-primary education consisted of 278 secondary schools, 64 technical schools, 52 industrial schools and four reformatories. These institutions provided post-primary education for an elite 995 students (745 boys and 250 girls), who completed this process by sitting 'Leaving Certificate' examinations. In 1966, post-primary education became state-funded. This resulted in opportunities being afforded to the wider population for the first time in the history of the state (NCCA, 2018). This research and analysis of assessment within post-primary education through the evaluation of stakeholder perceptions is timely, as it was initiated in the semicentennial year of post-primary education being state-funded.

Since 1966, the post-primary system of education has evolved in response to the processes of globalisation, as discussed in Section 1.2.1. Over this period, and as a result of globalisation, the system of 21st-century post-primary education in Ireland has advanced to include three distinct aims:

1. To promote the development of active citizenship for a healthy, responsible, and productive society.
2. To promote the development of key skills for an educated labour force for industry and for the economy.
3. To promote wellbeing for all in the education community, and wellbeing at the level of the individual.

(NCCA, 2009; DES, 2017a; Smyth, 2018; DES, 2015b; Dillon, 2011).

In summary, education is required to optimise the effectiveness of learning for the economy, for society and for the individual. As such, the Irish education system is responsible for economic, societal and human development. Hence, it is proposed that the Irish system of education must be multi-faceted. Simultaneous with the large-scale societal and economic needs, the 21st-century education system in Ireland aims to provide a student-centred experience (NCGE, 2017; DES, 2012a). Hence, it is proposed that the aims of the 21st-century education system in Ireland are considerable, as the system aims to produce an educated workforce, active, responsible citizens and individuals who are actively reflecting and taking action on their wellbeing. Research on the system in Ireland, particularly through the evaluation of stakeholder perspectives, is important to ascertain if the system is functioning in line with its distinct purpose. In order to contribute to

knowledge of the Irish Education system, this research provides a descriptive account of a case study within the post-primary system.

1.2.3 The post-primary system of education in Ireland: A descriptive account

The Irish education system is comprised of first- (primary), second- (post-primary) and third-level (further and higher) education (DES, 2018a). During this formal education, each individual experiences a process which is cumulative and complex. Despite a nationalised system governed by a consistent syllabus and ~~a~~ centralised, state-certified processes of assessment, each individual experience is unique (Keuning et al., 2017; Levin, 2018). Primary education is compulsory for all children in Ireland from the age of six, and it is required that three years of post-primary education must also be completed. Education then becomes optional for individuals. Participation may not be continuous nor linear (DES, 2016c; DES 2017a; Field and Leicester, 2001). However, irrespective of his/her level of prior education, a student may return to education at any time. Indeed, it is a stated aim of the current Irish government that lifelong learning among citizens be facilitated (DES, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2017d). Hence, the 21st-century system of education involves a large proportion of the population of Ireland is involved in the system when students, parents of students, teaching staff and policymakers are considered. Indeed, during the academic year 2016/17, over one million individuals were registered as full-time students in institutions aided by the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2018a), as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Numbers of students registered as full-time students in institutions funded by the Department of Education and Skills during 2016/17

Level of education	Number of students	Percentage of the total
First-level	558,314	49.7%
Second-level	384,226	34.2%
Third-level	181,039	16.1%
Total	1,123,579	100%

According to the state census in 2016, the population of Ireland was registered as 4,761,865 (CSO, 2016b). Therefore, in 2016, the number of students in state-funded, full-time education accounted for 23.6% of the total population using these reported figures, and the proportion of the post-primary cohort was 8% of the total population (GOI, 2016). However, it should be noted that this statistic includes neither additional numbers of students in part-time education nor those attending privately funded organisations. Hence, it is reasonable to conjecture that more than one quarter of Irish citizens are enrolled in education in Ireland, and that one twelfth of the population is engaged at post-primary level. In addition, it is reasonable to conjecture that each student will have at least one parent or guardian who is responsible for him/her and who will, in general, be invested in his/her wellbeing, and therefore his/her attendance and participation in education (Tusla, 2020). A large proportion of stakeholders are engaged in the post-primary system of education in Ireland, and it is a responsibility of researchers to include their perspectives in contemporary research on the education system. This research is specifically concerned with the perspectives of post-primary students and their parents.

One might ask what the perspectives of stakeholders of the Irish education system are. This may be a challenge to capture, however, as, despite the commonalities in the overarching purpose of education as discussed in Sections 1.2.2, no single institution of education is identical to another (Durkheim, 1977). This is true for modern-day schools, and it is recognised by the Department of Education and Skills (2020c). The department observes that, while the state funds the vast majority of institutions, each post-primary school is established by bodies that define the ethos of the school. In addition, a board of management defines the school's unique mission statement and operates the school on a day-to-day basis (ibid). This adds to the question of stakeholder experience. How can an institution of education be effective if, in the context of shared functionality, each institution is unique?

With approximately one twelfth of the Irish population attending post-primary education at any given time, it is a matter of significant public importance that this process is as effective and efficient as possible. Indeed, with this number of students engaged in formal post-primary education and additional numbers of parents supporting these students, an exceptionally large proportion of the Irish population is actively invested in the education system directly as primary stakeholders. Hence, research in the area of education and assessment and an analysis of the post-primary system through the evaluation of stakeholder perspectives are important and useful. For example, the perspectives of

students and parents ought to be considered by, and integrated into, any proposed strategy for systemic improvement. This will be discussed further in Section 1.4 of this chapter, when the rationale for this research is outlined. Firstly however, the key international and national policy framing aspects of post-primary assessment and stakeholder voice are introduced.

1.3 Assessment policy

This section introduces relevant policy where assessment within education and its utilisation for processes of evaluation is concerned. A review of international practice is briefly outlined to include the integral role of the OECD in reviewing and evaluating assessment policy amongst its 37 member countries (OECD, 2020). Subsequently, key Irish assessment policy and observations with regard to the use of assessment data from Inspectorate reports are introduced. Policy in relation to assessment as briefly outlined in this introductory chapter will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

1.3.1 International assessment policy

Within the 21st century global arena, countries strive for international rank and assert a global competitiveness.

In the context of globalisation as outlined and the impact of globalisation on a national economy or a system of education, policymakers strive to improve systems of education through multiple processes of evaluation and accountability. Processes of evaluation and accountability must include an empirical component (Burns et al., 2018; Fisher and Resnick, 2004). Analysis of assessment data is a globally implemented evaluation strategy (Cousins and Leithwood, 1986; Amrein-Beardsley, 2008; DeLuca and Johnson, 2017). International educational policy requires systems of education to integrate assessments into education in order to generate data which will be important to understand and provide detailed reports of the education process at large (De Luca and Johnson, 2017). Assessment results from individual nation states are compared and contrasted, and they are utilised as a prime indicator of the success or failure of students, teachers, schools, and entire education systems (Darmody, 2017; Lingard and Grek, 2007). Indeed, a drive exists within 21st-century education to quantify the effectiveness of national education systems (Harvey, 2005; Alkin, 2018). A competitive culture of comparison has

developed both nationally and locally, where adjoining institutions and systems vie for pole position. The UK, for example, invests in the creation of league tables for the purpose of evaluation (Stewart, 2018; Loke et al., 2008).

As a response to international policy developments, the OECD (2009) initiated a review on evaluation and assessment frameworks for improving school outcomes in sixteen countries internationally. International practice as regards evaluating education through analysis of a country's assessment data varies in terms its design and implementation (OECD, 2009). Different approaches involve a variety of strengths and weaknesses. The New Zealand approach, for example, is identified to have many strengths in terms of its evaluation of its education system. However, there is no shared vision of what constitutes a 'good' school in New Zealand. The OECD recommends that the concept of what is 'good' needs to be agreed upon within New Zealand if evaluation processes and policies are to have shared meaning, and therefore meaningful currency, on a national, and indeed international, stage (Nusche et al., 2012). To mention a second example, within the Northern Irish education system, it is recognised that policy on education, evaluation and assessment builds on teacher professionalism while simultaneously placing students at the centre of evaluation and assessment. However, inconsistencies within the evaluation and assessment framework have been observed (Shewbridge, 2014). Hence, like the New Zealand system, the Northern Irish system requires a consistent national approach. The Republic of Ireland was not included in the 16 countries which were involved in the first set of OECD evaluation and assessment policy reviews. However, a second series of reviews began in 2016, and data on the Irish system may become available in due course.

While the OECD researches, compares and contrasts the approach by individual nation states to processes of assessment and evaluation, the OECD also actively assesses samples of students from member countries and provides comparative analysis on those countries through the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). The PISA programme aims to assist national governments to shape education policies within the global context, as will be discussed in Chapter Two (OECD, 2018b).

Indeed, as the two OECD examples above (in relation to New Zealand and Northern Ireland) show, it is widely recognised that modern education systems are subject to a heightened degree of scrutiny and accountability where use of assessment data for education is concerned. Grek et al. (2009, p.5) argue that, not only have quantitative economic and educational targets been created by the globalisation of education through assessment data, but there is also a discernible responsibility on the part of local

institutions and local governments to meet evaluative targets. Individual nation states also use assessment data to evaluate their education systems. Mausethagen et al. (2018, p.41) identify that the foundation philosophy around the use of data in education systems is not only aimed at increasing accountability within the system, but also designed to 'boost professional development, individually and collectively, and consequently correct and develop existing practices'. The following section introduces the Irish policy context with regard to assessment and the use of data for evaluation.

1.3.2 Assessment policy and Ireland

Within post-primary schools in Ireland, the annual state examination results are traditionally analysed quantitatively at a local level (PDST, 2018; SEC, 2018). Therefore, in utilising assessment data for the purpose of evaluating individual institutions both on a local but also on a national level, the reliability and validity of all related processes, including data collection and analysis, is critical (Coburn and Turner, 2011; Farrell, 2014; Keuning et al., 2017). Questions such as whether the contemporary system of assessment is fit for purpose. For example, does the system of assessment actively recognise the many kinds of intelligence are frequently asked of the Irish post-primary education system (O'Connor, 2018; O'Brien, 2017; McGuire, 2017). In relation to the purpose of education as discussed in Section 1.2.2, it is important to ascertain if the system of assessment responds to the changing needs of society (in relation to economic, societal and human development), as well as promoting qualitative messages (e.g. regarding the development of wellbeing (DES, 2015b)). Assessment within the Irish post-primary system falls generally within two broad categories: state (national) assessment and local (school) assessment. National policy clearly governs state assessment. However, national policy also governs local assessment where psychometric assessments are utilised. For the purpose of this introductory chapter, two particular assessments are noted here in relation to national guidelines; (i) Junior Cycle assessment and, (ii) local entrance assessments where psychometric assessments are utilised.

Junior Cycle assessment

The Irish system of post-primary assessment is currently undergoing reform. The Junior Certificate was replaced by the Junior Cycle on a phased basis up to 2020. Junior Cycle assessment was reformed considerably during this time with the introduction of

classroom-based assessments (CBAs) and a subject learning and assessment review process (SLAR), as well as assessment tasks (DES, 2012c; 2015b). Reporting of Junior Cycle assessment has also been redefined with the formative Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement replacing the summative Junior Certificate (NCCA, 2017). Senior Cycle continues as it has, although it is under review (NCCA, 2020b).

Local entrance assessments

Where use of psychometric assessments within the Irish post-primary system is concerned, all activities concerning the use of these assessments is directly governed by the Department of Education and Skills through a national circular (DES, 2015; 2017c; 2019g). This circular requires that only properly qualified teachers (normally special educational needs teachers (SENs) and guidance counsellors) are qualified to appropriately implement psychometric assessments. While assessment policy is generally governed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the NCCA is not involved in policy around psychometric assessments.

Brown et al. (2016, p.20) observe a desire and a drive for evaluation within systems of education, which has increased processes of evaluation to the extent that transparency, accountability and continuous reflective practice within systems of post-primary education constitute a 'governing philosophy' in education. The actual use of data arising from the assessments is generally guided through inspection reports. For example, the following comments were noted in various Whole School Evaluation on Management Leadership and Learning (WSE/MLL) inspection reports:

> Senior Management should consider formulising a centralized system for tracking and monitoring each student's academic progress. This could include students' […] baseline assessment data and outcomes from subject assessments. As a means of strengthening the academic management role of Year Heads, this information will assist them in setting targets for students to reach their full learning potential. (Department of Education and Skills, 2015d, p.5)

> In order to continue to raise students' attainment, teachers should be provided with accurate and reliable baseline data in order to set specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound (SMART) targets. (Department of Education and Skills, 2018f, p.10)

While the use of assessment data is referred to within the inspection reports, the practice of using assessment data for the purpose of evaluation, grade forecasting and tracking student progress is not referred to in the general assessment policy documents provided

by the NCCA (2009; 2017; 2018), nor the Department of Education and Skills (DES, 2012c; 2015b), nor is it referred to in circular 0058/2019 (DES, 2019g). This reflection on the inconsistency between assessment policy and Inspectorate evaluation recommendations led to the development of this research as outlined in Section 1.4.

1.4 Rationale for this research

This section presents the rationale for undertaking the exploration of two distinct yet interlinked topics within post-primary education: assessment and stakeholder voice. A rationale for researching the area of assessment within post-primary education in Ireland is firstly outlined. A rationale for including stakeholder perspectives is subsequently introduced. In both instances, this research has been undertaken in order to respond to a gap in independent research on the Irish post-primary education system with regard to stakeholder perceptions of assessment which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

1.4.1 Rationale for researching assessment

The researcher is an experienced guidance counsellor who had been employed in the Irish post-primary education system for over a decade at the time this research was initiated. As a guidance counsellor, the researcher is fully qualified in all aspects of psychometric assessment and is fully aware of circulars pertaining to the implementation of psychometric tests and the controversial dates surrounding the meaning and use of psychometric test data (DES, 2015; 2017c; 2019g). It therefore came as a surprise to the researcher that the Inspectorate recommended the use of psychometric assessment data for analysis on what would be 'realistic' student performance. During a WSE/MLL which took place in the researcher's school, the Inspectorate noted the following:

> The Principal and Deputy Principal [should] complete an analysis of the students' achievements in the certificate examinations against National norms […] this analysis [should] include a comparison of student outcomes against the standardised tests administered on entry to the School […] These measures will provide a more realistic perspective on student performance. (DES, 2016e, p.3)

This was of significant interest to the researcher particularly as this recommendation was presented under the heading of 'Effectiveness of Leadership for Learning' within the Whole School Evaluation Inspectorate Report. This official recommendation by the

Inspectorate (2016e) marked a usage of the implemented psychometric tests which was not in line with the Department of Education and Skills circular 0034/2015 (DES, 2015). Subsequent circulars 0035/2017 and 0058/2019 updated circular 0034/2015 and also made no reference to the use of psychometric assessment data for use as baseline data, and these circulars apply 'to all instances when a standardised test, either ability or achievement, is used' (DES, 2019g, p.1). It was clear that the Inspectorate, and by default the Department of Education and Skills, perceived psychometric assessment data to be useful in predicting student performance, and that it wished for this data to be actively utilised by the school. This is not a perspective that is outlined in the respective circulars which dictate the national policy on these types of assessment. A conflict in existing DES policy was observed.

Concurrent with the whole school inspection taking place in the researcher's school, the Junior Cycle and associated changes to national assessment were being newly introduced on an incremental basis. Post-primary schools were beginning to integrate the new curriculum and associated assessments into practice (DES, 2015b). This phasing in of the Junior Cycle was marked by significant industrial relations unrest (Darmody, 2017). Hence, the practice and use of assessment data in general were at the fore of the researcher's teaching and guidance counselling practice in 2016. In addition to the reforms as described above, Senior Cycle education continued as established despite the fact that Senior Cycle education in Ireland is continuously mooted for review (NCCA, 2004; NCCA, 2009; NCCA, 2018). NCCA proposals of June 2004, for example, envisaged a significant and exciting reform of the Leaving Certificate programme and its assessment. However, the set of proposals in its entirety was not accepted by the then minister for education and science, who regarded it as a 'Rolls Royce' model of reform (Hyland, 2011, p.6). This leads to the question of what type or level of assessment we currently have in the post-primary education system if it is not the 'Rolls Royce' model. Despite the lack of large-scale reform at Senior Cycle, the researcher was also mindful that, in their 2015 publication, research professor and head of the Social Research Division at the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) Smyth and Banks proposed a need for further debate on the nature of assessment. Hence, an initial gap in terms of independent research on the area of assessment was noted by the researcher. This study was undertaken to fulfil that need. A research study on the perceptions of assessment within the Irish post-primary education system emerged as an alternate

perspective to that of the Inspectorate and of the researcher as noted. Due consideration was given to which perspectives to include, as detailed in Section 1.4.2

1.4.2 Rationale for researching stakeholder perspectives

American professor of philosophy and business R. Edward Freeman is recognised as being responsible for introducing the term 'stakeholder' to business management discourse towards the end of the 20th century (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997). Freeman defined stakeholders as 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives' (1984, p.46). As the frequency of use of the term 'stakeholder' has increased, greater analysis of the concept has identified multiple layers and concepts integral to the term. Stakeholders may be primary or secondary; they may be the actors or those acted upon; and they may be involved in an organisation in a professional, voluntary, or involuntarily capacity (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997). Stakeholder voice may involve a large and varied range of activities, including reflection, discussion, dialogue, and action, on any matter which directly or indirectly impacts on the relevant system (Fleming, 2015; Fielding, 2004; Robinson and Taylor, 2007). In accepting and adapting the term and the concept of a 'stakeholder' within discussions relating to education, numerous stakeholders may be identified. Stakeholders of education include students, parents, inspectors, employers, policymakers, and others (Mitchell et al., 1997). However, the Education Act (1998) does not refer to the term 'stakeholder' when referring to parties in education. Within the act (ibid), however, many parties, such as school patrons, principals, and teachers, are mentioned. In the absence of the term 'stakeholder', 'partnership' is referred to in The Education Act 1998. The Education Act aims

> to make provisions in the interest of the common good, for the education of every person in the state […] to ensure that the education system is accountable to students, their parents, and the state […] in a spirit of partnership. (Government of Ireland, 1998, p.1)

In the context of a productive and healthy society, all citizens have a vested interest in education, and they could therefore be defined as stakeholders. There is a 'compelling' need for the inclusion of stakeholder voice within education (Fleming, 2013, p.244). In addition, Brown et al. (2019, p.3) observe that stakeholder voice has 'by no means become an entirely accepted feature of school life'. In practice, stakeholders can find themselves limited to very constricted and tokenistic roles and degrees of participation

(Brown et al., 2020). Devine (2004, p.115) observes stakeholder activity as being 'confined to independent initiatives in schools.' Prior contemporary research in the area of principal and teacher perspectives has been plentiful (Ui Chonaill, 2018; Twohill et al., 2018; Darmody, 2017; O'Grady, 2017). Darmody (2017) undertook research on Irish post-primary teachers' perspectives of assessment. It was observed by Darmody (2017, p.133) that an area 'meriting future research is the degree of congruence between teachers' and students' perspectives of assessment in the Irish post-primary context'. Indeed, McIntyre et al. (2005, p.156) found that teachers believe students have 'constructive and sensible ideas' with regard to teaching and learning. However, the perspectives and voices of students and parents in research have been less plentiful. It was decided to include both student and parent/guardian voice in this research, as both student voice and parent/guardian voice are legislated for and included in school self-evaluation guidelines (DES, 2012b, 2016a, 2016d, 2018c). It may be generally understood in the context of this document that where the term 'parent' is used, it is in reference to parents and guardians. In addition, for the purpose of this research, the term 'stakeholder' will include post-primary school students and their parents. In focusing on stakeholder perspectives on assessment the researcher aims to build on research which has previously been undertaken. A review of previous contemporary empirical research identified that Fleming (2013) undertook research in the area of student voice in education at large. Within this research, Fleming (2013, p.238) refers to 'insecurity relating to examinations emerged as a growing concern for students'. This research study aims to build on Flemings research by directly addressing post-primary assessment.

In summary, where the perspectives of stakeholders are concerned, this research was undertaken in order to build on prior contemporary postgraduate research on stakeholder voice as conducted by Fleming (2013), who investigated student voice with regard to the education system at large, and Darmody (2017), who researched teacher perspectives of assessment. This research was undertaken at a pivotal time in the evolution of the post-primary education system in Ireland: a time when Junior Cycle assessment was being phased in to replace the Junior Certificate and Senior Cycle was under review, as noted (NCCA, 2004; NCCA, 2009; NCCA, 2018). It is hoped that this research will inform wider policy and perhaps future reform around post-primary assessment in Ireland through an analysis and evaluation of stakeholder perspectives. In the context of the rationale for this research as outlined, clear research questions had to be identified in order

to provide a clear framework for this study. Three research questions were identified which will be introduced in Section 1.5 below.

1.5 Research question

In order to undertake research that is aimed at informing wider policy around post-primary education in Ireland through an analysis of stakeholder perspectives, it is necessary to identify a clear and succinct research question. Thus, the primary research question providing a framework for this research is identified as follows:

> What is the perception of post-primary assessment among students and parents in a case study school in Ireland during a period of simultaneous continuity and reform?

In order to answer this question and develop a deep understanding of the perspectives of assessment held by students and parents, this research also addresses the following secondary questions:

- What are the benefits of assessment within a post-primary school?
- What are the challenges of assessment within a post-primary school?

In order to effectively answer the primary and secondary research questions and to contribute to previous research undertaken in the area of assessment (Hyland, 2011; Darmody, 2017; Banks et al., 2018) and stakeholder voice in education (Fleming, 2013; Ui Chonaill, 2018; Twohill et al., 2018; Darmody, 2017; O'Grady, 2017), a case study methodology was selected.

1.6 Methodology

In order to make an effective and valued contribution to prior empirical research and to the system and policies of assessment and stakeholder voice in post-primary schools, this research is underpinned by a sound approach to all aspects of research design which will be fully outlined in Chapter Five (Creswell, 2014). Drawing on the conceptual framework and a review of the literature (as outlined in Chapters One to Four inclusively), consideration was given to the creation of an appropriate research design wherein all stages of the research are clearly and considerately applied in order to result in well-

founded conclusions (Yin, 2018). As suggested in the title, this research involved a single case study analysis of assessment in post-primary education through the evaluation of stakeholder perspectives. The perspectives of students and parents were the focus of this research as noted. However, in line with the pragmatic approach to the research at large, additional perspectives were also included in the research, as they informed the national and local context of the study. For example, the researcher attempted to include the Inspectorate voice, as a whole school evaluation catalysed this research as discussed in Section 1.4.1. This was not possible, however, as the Inspectorate was not available to participate. Serendipitously, the Director of Assessment from the National Centre for Curriculum and Assessment responded to an invitation to partake in this research. An interview was held with the director subsequent to a review of the literature and prior to data collection in the case study school, in order for the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of assessment guidelines, framework and policy. The discussion which took place during this interview informed the creation of the interview schedules (Appendices Two, Three and Four) and survey questions (Appendices Nine and Ten). In order to gain an understanding of the practice of assessment within the local case study school, a focus group with teachers was orchestrated. This interview allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of teacher perspectives and assessment practice within the case study school. Finally, focus groups with stakeholders were conducted, and a survey instrument was circulated to gather stakeholder perspectives. In addition, descriptive statistical analysis of assessment data was undertaken. All aspects of the methodology and data analysis are presented and discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

1.7 Conclusion

This introductory chapter contextualised and provided a rationale for this research study. In order to provide a context for this research, this chapter introduced Irish post-primary education as a system operating within a global arena. A review of global and national assessment policies was provided, and a rationale for undertaking the research study at a key time in the development, evolution and reform of the post-primary system of assessment amidst the continuity of other assessments was presented. The research questions directing the research were outlined, and a brief overview of the methodology utilised in this research was provided.

This thesis is organised into six further chapters. Chapter Two provides a review of prior empirical research undertaken in the areas of assessment and stakeholder voice. Chapter Three provides a summary of a review of the wider literature and discusses the key theoretical frameworks utilised to discuss these topics. In addition, Chapter Three discusses the key theoretical framework utilised within this research. Chapter Four provides an overview of international and national policy which provides a context for this research on the topics of assessment and stakeholder voice. The methodology involved in this research and the approach adopted for the purpose of data analysis are outlined in Chapter Five. Presentation and analysis of the empirical findings of this research are presented in Chapter Six. Finally, Chapter Seven presents an overview and discussion of the challenges encountered and the reflective findings and recommendations resulting from this research.

Chapter Two: An overview of previous empirical research in the areas of second-level assessment and stakeholder voice

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of previous empirical research undertaken in the areas of (i) assessment, and (ii) stakeholder voice in order to provide a clear rationale for this postgraduate research. This chapter outlines key contemporary empirical research by providing an initial account of international research and subsequently outlining contemporary Irish research with regard to several pertinent areas. Indeed, Section 2.2 provides an overview of research in the area of assessment, while Section 2.3 investigates, summarises, and provides a critique of research on stakeholder voice in education. The purpose and focus of this chapter are to illustrate, to summarise, and therefore to provide clarity on, the approach taken by the researcher in this study to address the identified gap in the literature. Chapters Three and Four will then build on the content outlined in this chapter by discussing the wider literature and policy respectively.

2.2 Empirical research on assessment within second-level education

Empirical research offers a way of gaining knowledge by means of gathering evidence that can be analysed quantitatively or qualitatively (Bryman, 2008). This section outlines contemporary empirical research which has been carried out in the area of second-level assessment. Section 2.2.1 presents an overview of contemporary international research, while Section 2.2.2 discusses research undertaken on the Irish second-level, or post-primary, system of assessment. Subsequent to these discussions, the purpose of assessment within second-level (or post-primary) education, as deduced by previous researchers investigating the area, is outlined in Section 2.3.3. Given the purpose of assessment, Section 2.2.4 returns the focus to the Irish post-primary system of assessment and introduces previous research undertaken on the relationship between assessments within the system. Subsequent to these discussions on empirical research in the area of assessment, Section 2.2.5 reflects on Section 2.2 at large and outlines the clear gaps in the research undertaken to date, thereby providing a rationale for undertaking this post-graduate case study research on the topic during a critical time of continuity and reform within the Irish post-primary education and assessment system. Finally, the researcher considers a definition of assessment for use in this research, based on previous empirical studies.

2.2.1 International research on the system of second-level assessment

This section provides a reflective account of international research undertaken on second-level assessment. A review of empirical research on the topic denotes a spectrum of activity, and therefore a spectrum of quality where international, national and local assessment is concerned (Black, 1998; Nusche, 2012; OECD, 2014; Bergseng et al., 2019). In order to provide a consistent and accurately comparable account of previous international research, research undertaken by the OECD is primarily referenced. Indeed, the OECD is recognised as a 'major player in education with global influence' (Brown et al., 2019, p.2), and it has carried out substantial international research to provide an overview of assessment within the global education landscape (Nuche, 2012; Bergseng et al., 2019; OECD, 2014). In particular, the OECD has carried out a systematic review on international assessment frameworks, with the specific purpose of exploring how each system can be adapted to improve the 'quality, equity and efficiency' of education and assessment (Nusche, 2012 p.3).

International systems of education generally strive to minimise inequality, promote inclusion and raise literacy and numeracy standards for their citizens. In the southern hemisphere, for example, current priorities for the New Zealand school sector are to lift student achievement in literacy and numeracy, and to enable all young people, including those of Māori descent, to achieve success (Nuche, 2012). Some countries in the northern hemisphere also identify with this goal. Diversity, culture and equality are important issues in Europe, for example, where, in 2015, almost one in four 15-year-old students in OECD and European Union (EU) countries reported that they were either foreign-born or had at least one foreign-born parent (Bergseng et al., 2019, p.15). Similarly, in the UK, the *White Paper for Education: Educational Excellence Everywhere* (Department for Education, 2016) refers to the provision of access to education for all citizens of England, irrespective of background, ability or needs, in order that they may 'reach their full potential and [be prepared] to succeed in adult life in modern Britain' (p.5). A final example is that of education policy in Ontario, which reflects the economic vision of education, but it also aims for every student to become an actively engaged citizen (Government of Ontario, 2014). However, despite the shared goals among countries, systems of education and assessment vary. In order to mitigate these differences and create a relative comprehension of systems of education, the OECD developed the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000, whereby students of

different nationalities could be directly compared, contrasted and ranked through assessment (Grek, 2009). PISA assessments taking place in 2018 marked the seventh iteration of the assessments since their inception. Hence, seven data sets, and multiple subsequent publications based on the empirical data, are available (Schleicher, 2019). However, this empirical data is used for one main purpose: to measure a comparative performance of national educational systems (Schleicher, 2019; Nusche, 2012). The role of the OECD in the re-imagining, development and evolution of systems of education and assessment will be addressed further in Chapter Three via a review of the literature. However, for the purpose of this chapter, which focuses on previous empirical research carried out on assessment, the OECD dominates the international academic landscape. It is argued that in-depth research on single case study schools is vitally important in order to complement these large-scale OECD and PISA research events and subsequent research findings. Prior to outlining how this research complements the OECD approach, an overview of research on the Irish national system of post-primary assessment is examined.

2.2.2 Irish research on the system of post-primary assessment

This section provides a reflective account of empirical research undertaken on assessment within the post-primary system in Ireland. Where curriculum and assessment are created and reviewed, the National Centre for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) undertakes research with the purpose of informing decision-making (O'Donnell, 2018; NCCA, 2020d; NCCA, 2020b) However, just as the OECD dominates large-scale international research in the area of education and assessment, as outlined above, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) carries out significant empirical research on a national level in Ireland (Banks et al., 2018; Banks and Smyth, 2015b; Smyth et al., 2011). This section introduces the topic of research on assessment in Ireland by focusing on research undertaken by ESRI in the areas of Senior and Junior Cycle education in the first instance. Additional empirical research on the topic of post-primary assessment will be referred to in Section 2.3 with regard to stakeholder voice.

As noted in Chapter One, the Irish post-primary system of education consists of Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle education. For the majority who complete Senior Cycle within post-primary education, a final assessment known as the Leaving Certificate is undertaken. For stakeholders of the post-primary system in Ireland, significant focus is placed upon this particular assessment (Banks and Smyth, 2015a; Banks and Smyth,

2015b; Byrne and Smyth, 2010). The Leaving Certificate is a high-stakes assessment which has an impact within the education system at large. In their 2015 research, Banks and Smyth used data from a longitudinal study to investigate the factors influencing the levels of stress among students preparing for Leaving Certificate. Their article is entitled ' "Your whole life depends on it": academic stress and high stakes testing in Ireland' (Banks and Smyth, 2015a). Follow-on research in 2018 found that many students are frustrated with the Leaving Certificate system of assessment (Banks et al., 2018). Indeed, students view the Leaving Certificate assessment as a 'memory test' which does not truly reflect their abilities or skills (Banks et al., 2018, p.35). It seems that research undertaken by Smyth et al. in 2011 (p.xvi) contrasts with this finding, as Senior Cycle students from the 12 case study schools included in the research were 'broadly satisfied' with their Leaving Certificate programme. However, student satisfaction was linked with how students were achieving academically (Smyth et al., 2011, p.xvi). Indeed, according to the Growing Up In Ireland (GUI) research, 40% of students feel that school is of 'no help' in preparing them 'for adult life or the world of work' (GUI, 2019b, p.5). In addition, disadvantage and unfairness within education as visible through analysis of assessment data, are widely discussed in the literature. To note just one example, an individual's socioeconomic background is widely accepted as having a major impact on educational achievement (Hyland, 2011; Smyth and Banks, 2011). According to the 'Growing Up in Ireland' survey data, 5% of young people leave school without completing the Leaving Certificate assessment (GUI, 2019b, p.3). However, the rate amongst those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds is 11%, compared to 3% from professional backgrounds (GUI, 2019b, p.3). From the above, it is clear that empirical research on the Irish Leaving Certificate assessment is ample. However, there is little empirical research to be found on other Senior Cycle assessments in the Irish context; therefore, a gap exists.

In Chapter One, it was noted that the Junior Cycle has replaced the Junior Certificate incrementally since 2014. Empirical research on this newly introduced area of Junior Cycle curriculum and assessment was not available at the time this research began (2016), nor was it readily available before the completion of this research. Indeed, while there have been many ESRI-directed research studies in the area of Senior Cycle and the Leaving Certificate assessment, as documented above, the latest text concerning the Junior Cycle referenced on the ESRI website is an opinion piece (Smyth, 2012). It must therefore be concluded that research on the 'new' Junior Cycle and the transition from the Junior Certificate to the Junior Cycle is currently absent, unavailable or inaccessible.

Hence, it is clear that a gap exists regarding empirical research on the contemporary Junior Cycle as a substitute for the Junior Certificate. In summary, contemporary empirical research on the Irish post-primary system of assessment is weighted towards the Leaving Certificate assessment in particular. The purpose of assessment may account for this imbalance.

2.2.3 The purpose of assessment

The purpose of assessment operates along a spectrum between formative and summative (Taber et al., 2011; Sadler, 1989; Popham, 2006; Harlan, 2005; Bloom et al., 1971). In essence, formative assessment relates to a type of assessment which is primarily focused on how judgements about the quality of output can be used to impact upon learning by shaping and improving future output (Sadler, 1989). Contrastingly, summative assessment is concerned with summarising the learning status of a student or group of students, and thus it does not normally support learning (Sadler, 1989). In order to understand the purpose of assessment, one may focus on the independent yet interlinked concepts of formative and summative assessment as outlined in the literature. However, a review of empirical research on the topic yields a different focus. Indeed, the purpose of assessment is described more in terms of certification and subsequent access to opportunity in contemporary empirical research rather than formative or summative purpose (Brown, 2008; Brown et al., 2016; GUI, 2019; Banks and Smyth, 2015). Indeed, contemporary empirical research on the Irish post-primary education system consistently notes the importance of the Leaving Certificate as a mechanism for accessing subsequent opportunities. For example, in her discussion paper titled 'Entry to higher education in Ireland in the 21st century', Hyland defines the Leaving Certificate assessment as a 'passport' to opportunity (2011, p.5). Similarly, Banks et al. (2018, p.36) also observed in their ESRI working paper on the Senior Cycle review that there is an 'acute' awareness in post-primary schools of the impact of post-primary assessment on access to subsequent opportunities. Indeed, Banks et al. (2018) observe that the Leaving Certificate is described by students as 'intimidating', given the perceived influence of the Leaving Certificate exam in deciding one's 'whole career' (Banks et al., 2018, p.36). This finding by Irish researchers is not unique to the Irish post-primary Leaving Certificate assessment. Rather, in her research on nine post-primary systems around the world, O'Donnell (2018, p.33) found that, in all nine systems, certificates achieved through processes of assessment, are intended as a tool for accessing opportunities.

Prior to moving on from this subject and the purpose of assessment, it is necessary to note that associated with the purpose of assessment in contemporary Irish research is the interlinked issue of extra private tuition. Queens University researchers Jo-Anne Baird et al. (2014) addressed the issue of grinds in the Republic of Ireland post-primary system, and they found that the investment enables students to have additional time with a teacher on a particular subject, a service for which there is little capacity in post-primary schools. Lowry (2020) and Baird et al. (2014) propose that students participate in grinds, as they focus directly on summative assessment by providing focused insight into the marking scheme and assessment-focused answers. In addition, Hyland (2011) observes that grinds enhance a student's confidence and performance in assessments. In 2009, Smyth conducted a survey with approximately 1,500 students in Ireland, finding that 45% had received private tutoring in their last year of school, representing an increase of 32% since 1994. The grinds industry in Ireland is reportedly worth between €20 and €50 million per year (Murphy, 2012b; Newenham, 2013). Hence, it is proposed that the summative purpose of assessment is primarily focused upon by stakeholders, resulting in a lucrative grinds industry which is directly driven by a desire on behalf of an individual student to achieve as highly as possible. Indeed, the purpose of assessment is so interlinked with subsequent access to opportunity in the Irish system that *The Irish Times* presents a comprehensive analysis on each post-primary school in Ireland with regard to students' summative Leaving Certificate assessment results. In addition, the progression of students after the Leaving Certificate is considered to be so important currently within Irish society that a dedicated website, Schooldays.ie, provides information on the progression of students without the 'ranking' element. It provides an analysis of the numbers of students progressing to higher education institutions as a means to communicate the progression and pathways of post-primary graduates to the wider public. Contemporary research on the Irish post-primary system of assessment indicates that teachers are aware of the purpose of assessment in terms of summative evaluation and the link between it and access to opportunity. This results in a focus on the summative aspect of teaching and learning. For example, research carried out by Taber et al. (2011) found that assessment is understood by teachers to have a summative and evaluative function. Similarly, Darmody (2017) notes that teachers may feel accountable and pressurised in terms of assessment data relating to their classes.

In relation to the purpose of assessment, previous empirical research on post-primary assessment emphasises the 'need to reduce the level of stress' within the system (Banks

et al., 2018, p.43). The absence of a healthy work/life balance is evident in other research on the Irish system. For example, Byrne et al. (2018, p.37) found that Senior Cycle students in particular are likely to give up 'their after-school sports to cope with the demands of homework and studying' (Byrne et al., 2018, p.37). Similarly, in a review of the Senior Cycle, parents highlighted the problematic nature of the overall demands placed on students, with the workload understood as being 'excessive' (Banks et al., 2018, p.53). Research carried out by Banks et al. (2018, p.53) also highlighted parents' concerns about the emphasis on assessment and its impact on students' wellbeing. Additional research conducted by Banks and Smith (2015) further supports the proposition that young people spend less time on leisure activities due to their schooling and assessments. The impact of the reported pressures on young adults in relation to post-primary assessment is significant. The exact or isolated impact of the post-primary system of assessment on the wellbeing of young adults is unknown. However, for young people in 21st century Ireland, Growing Up in Ireland research (2019c, p.3) notes that young adults report more depressive symptoms than their mothers, while 'over a fifth of 20-year-old men, and almost a third of 20-year-old women had elevated scores on a measure of depressive symptoms' (GUI, 2019d, p.3). In addition, 33% of young men and 40% of young women are classified as either overweight or obese (GUI, 2019d, p.5). This is a concern. In addition, in relation to young adults, smoking, drinking and drug taking typically increase during the teen years. For example, less than 1% of thirteen-year-olds smoke daily, compared to 8% at age seventeen and 15% at age twenty (GUI, 2019d, p.9). 15% of thirteen-year-olds stated that they had consumed alcohol, but that figure increased markedly to 89% by the age of seventeen. At seventeen, 77% of young adults drank alcohol once per week or less, while just over 5% drank alcohol more than once per week (GUI, 2019d, p.10). A number of factors, including post-primary assessment may contribute to these behaviours. However, it is noted that NCCA research on the Senior Cycle (2018, p.11) observed an 'excessive exam focus leading to stress and anxiety'. The purpose of assessment, particularly the Leaving Certificate assessment in the Irish system, is contributing to a summative-focused post-primary education system which is supported by a lucrative grinds industry. This will be discussed further in relation to the relationship between assessments in Section 2.2.4.

2.2.4 Research on the relationship between assessments

A review of empirical research, as detailed in Section 2.2.2, led the researcher to conclude that a focus on the Leaving Certificate assessment is evident within Irish society. In addition, subsequent to a review of the purpose of assessment within the Irish post-primary education system, detailed in Section 2.2.3, the researcher concluded that the summative nature of the Leaving Certificate and its purpose as a mechanism for opening subsequent opportunities has resulted in a stressed and unhealthy post-primary student body. However, in relation to the Inspectorate report recommendations introduced in Sections 1.3.2 and 1.4.1, research on the relationship between the Leaving Certificate and other assessment are discussed in this section. Darmody (2017) notes that assessment is valued by teachers, since it functions as a method of continuous categorisation and feedback. However, contemporary empirical research in the area of the relationship between various post-primary assessments is not evident where the Irish system is concerned; a significant gap exists. Nonetheless, there is one source of data resulting from research on the relationships between assessments. The commercial business GL Assessment, which is a company that provides the Cognitive Abilities (CAT4) assessment, has carried out research in this area. Indeed, an absence of reporting in relation to the relationships between assessments is also observed by GL Assessment, which has responded to 'extensive market research' and provided multiple reports with detailed information on potential grade attainment correlations for teachers, students and parents (GL Assessment, 2020, p.118). In this way, GL Assessment is providing a specialised and targeted service within the 'free-market' to teachers, parents and students to enhance their experience of the state funded post-primary system. It is a concern that this information is provided by the test company itself in the absence of, for example, ESRI or any other independent research. Irrespective of the question of bias, a number of correlations for both the UK assessment system and the Irish system are provided (GL Assessment, 2020, p.180, 184). For example, Table 2, below, outlines calculated correlations between the CAT4 assessment and the British General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results. English and maths are highlighted by the researcher in this table as these subjects are focused upon in this research and will be discussed in Chapter Six.

Table 2: GL Assessment data: Correlations between the CAT4 and the British GCSEs

(Source: GL Assessment, 2020)

	Mean *CAT4* score	Verbal SAS	Quantitative SAS	Nonverbal SAS	Spatial SAS
Attainment 8*	0.72	0.67	0.64	0.61	0.57
Art and Design	0.48	0.44	0.38	0.41	0.42
Biology	0.62	0.57	0.53	0.49	0.47
Business Studies	0.56	0.45	0.52	0.49	0.40
Chemistry	0.57	0.50	0.50	0.45	0.43
Citizenship	0.51	0.52	0.45	0.41	0.35
Computer Studies	0.65	0.60	0.56	0.53	0.51
Design and Technology	0.55	0.47	0.51	0.45	0.46
Drama	0.55	0.55	0.45	0.47	0.42
English Language	0.62	0.62	0.53	0.51	0.46
English Literature	0.58	0.57	0.50	0.48	0.43
Food and Nutrition	0.61	0.59	0.53	0.51	0.47
French	0.53	0.54	0.45	0.43	0.38
Geography	0.68	0.65	0.59	0.56	0.52
German	0.53	0.54	0.45	0.42	0.38
History	0.60	0.59	0.52	0.48	0.43
ICT	0.52	0.43	0.49	0.46	0.38
Maths	0.78	0.66	0.72	0.66	0.63
Media Studies	0.50	0.41	0.48	0.42	0.38
Music	0.56	0.55	0.50	0.44	0.45
Physical Education	0.60	0.56	0.52	0.49	0.46
Physics	0.60	0.52	0.52	0.47	0.46
Religious Education	0.53	0.52	0.46	0.44	0.37
Science Combined	0.66	0.59	0.56	0.55	0.50
Sociology	0.48	0.39	0.48	0.40	0.34
Spanish	0.45	0.44	0.38	0.37	0.35
Statistics	0.72	0.60	0.60	0.67	0.57

With regard to Table 2, GL Assessment notes that 'The correlations are all highly significant' (GL Assessment, 2020, p.186). Reflecting on Table 2, it is clear that the range of correlations is $0.34 \leq r \leq 0.72$, which implies that GL Assessment accepts that a variation in the range of 0.38 is acceptable in terms of being considered 'highly significant'. This is problematic in relation to teacher, student and parent perspectives, and the reports for these groups. Regarding the Irish assessment system, GL Assessment has normed its data for the Irish population. Table 3, below, highlights the range of correlation coefficients between the CAT4 assessment and the Leaving Certificate.

Table 3: GL Assessment data: CAT4 correlation with the Irish Leaving Certificate

(Source: GL Assessment, 2020)

	Mean *CAT4* score	Verbal SAS	Quantitative SAS	Nonverbal SAS	Spatial SAS
Art	0.55	0.52	0.42	0.48	0.47
Biology	0.60	0.63	0.43	0.48	0.44
Business	0.50	0.60	0.42	0.30	0.30
Chemistry	0.52	0.50	0.48	0.40	0.29
Construction Studies	0.52	0.44	0.31	0.40	0.45
English	0.58	0.67	0.42	0.43	0.35
French	0.54	0.59	0.39	0.41	0.35
Geography	0.60	0.63	0.42	0.43	0.45
History	0.46	0.52	0.35	0.30	0.33
Home Economics	0.43	0.54	0.42	0.32	0.20
Irish	0.40	0.46	0.29	0.31	0.23
Maths	0.65	0.57	0.53	0.53	0.47
Physics	0.53	0.50	0.46	0.44	0.38

Similar to Table 2, the correlations in Table 3 above have a considerable range, of 0.42, as, for the Irish system, $0.23 \leq r \leq 0.65$ (GL Assessment, 2020, p.203). Again, this range is problematic where the use of these assessments is considered appropriate for use as baseline data. With regard to the reliability of this data, however, the 'measure of the consistency of a student's test scores over repeated testing, assuming conditions remain the same' (GL Assessment, 2020, p.201). GL Assessment calculated the reliability of the CAT4 for the Irish population as outlined in Table 4:

Table 4: GL Assessment data: CAT4 reliability

(Source: GL Assessment, 2020)

	CAT4 reliability				
Test level	**Verbal Reasoning Battery**	**Quantitative Reasoning Battery**	**Nonverbal Reasoning Battery**	**Spatial Ability Battery**	**Overall *CAT4***
Level D	0.89	0.90	0.88	0.87	0.96
Level E	0.89	0.88	0.86	0.87	0.95
Level F	0.90	0.87	0.84	0.88	0.95
Level G	0.91	0.86	0.83	0.88	0.95
Average D-G	**0.90**	**0.88**	**0.85**	**0.87**	**0.95**

Table 4 outlines the test reliabilities of the CAT4 for the Irish population (GL Assessment, 2020, p.201) However, considering Table 4 at large, CAT 4 reliability, in terms of the Irish population, is $0.83 \leq \alpha \leq 0.96$ according to GL Assessment. Hence, the range of reliability is 0.13. Level E has been highlighted in Table 4 by the researcher to indicate

the reliabilities of the test offered to Sixth Class students as it is this cohort who undertake their entrance assessment for post-primary school. For the Level E testing $0.86 \leq \alpha \leq 0.95$, with a range of 0.09. Hence, it is acknowledged that CAT4 Level E is a statistically reliable test. Indeed, it is observed by GL Assessment that the test reliabilities are 'high' (GL Assessment, 2020, p.201). However, GL Assessment also explains that the CAT4 assessment 'has no direct connection to the curriculum' (GL Assessment, 2020, p.127). Hence, irrespective of its reliability, as an assessment, the utilisation of CAT4 assessment data for use as baseline data is questionable. Yet, this is the data recommended by the Inspectorate for use as baseline data, goalsetting and tracking students, as outlined in Chapter One. Similarly, GL Assessment (2020, p.130) notes, 'Any mis perspectives of CAT4 being a measure of fixed ability should be challenged'. This is an interesting proviso in terms of the written instructions/guidelines for the use of assessment data. However, it must also be noted, in terms of the integrity of the assessment, that some students may be more prepared for the assessment than others. For example, in a survey of primary school teachers carried out by the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) and O'Leary et al. (2019), it was reported that half of the respondents admitted to spending time revising topics for standardised tests. In addition, one in four respondents claimed that they were aware of the practice of 'teaching to the test' (ibid). Interestingly, as regards teacher training on standardised testing, O Leary et al. (2019) found that 75% of respondents (primary teachers) indicated that they had not engaged in formal learning in standardised testing since their initial teacher education. This is interesting in relation to the post-primary sector, as we must ask: have teachers ever received training on this type of psychometric assessment? Training in psychometric assessments normally occurs in the case of post-graduate qualifications in Guidance and Counselling and Special Needs Education (DES, 2019g). However, GL Assessment notes that, 'If results are regularly used across a whole school in a way that has a marked impact on teaching and learning, it will be important for all recipients of results to have a good knowledge of CAT4' (GL Assessment, 2020, p.126). In addition, GL Assessment recognises that awareness surrounding the meaning of the assessment and the assessment data are not widely known in post-primary settings (GL Assessment, 2020). This is a major practical and ethical concern in terms of using the assessment data for the purpose of baseline data in Irish post-primary schools. This research investigates the use of the CAT4 assessment in the case study school with a particular focus on the relationship between it and subsequent assessments in post-primary school.

2.2.5 Observations concerning research on assessment and the identification of gaps

As noted in Section 2.2.1, this research adds to the body of international research on the topic of assessment within education, as, in contrast to the large-scale national and international studies on assessment, this research focuses on a single case study. In reflecting on contemporary research which has been carried out internationally in the area of post-primary assessment and within the Irish post-primary system, several gaps are identified to exist. In particular, where the Irish post-primary system is concerned, a general absence of research in the area of assessment, apart from that relating to the Leaving Certificate, is evident, as discussed in Section 2.2.2. In particular, a comprehensive literature review yielded an absence of independent research in the area of post-primary entrance assessments. Similarly, there is no research available on the topic of 'in-house' or 'local' post-primary assessments such as Christmas and summer assessments. In addition, with the exception of Smyth (2011), who notes that Junior and Leaving Certificate exam grades are highly correlated, the relationship between assessments within post-primary education is not discussed in contemporary research. This absence of research on assessment within the Irish post-primary system is problematic and leaves a substantial gap in relation to post-primary research. In addition, as noted in Chapter One and as will be explored in Chapter Four, the Junior Cycle reform (DES, 2015b; DES, 2017b) has introduced significant incremental changes to post-primary assessment. Research is needed at the current time in order to accurately document this reform during a time when Senior Cycle assessment is continuing as established. As such, the research undertaken in this study is an initial step towards understanding reform in the context of continuity at a key time in Irish post-primary education, and it will therefore be revelatory in nature. In addition to exploring these identified gaps regarding post-primary assessment, this research focuses on stakeholder perceptions which will be outlined in Section 2.3. Prior to this discussion, however, and given the review of prior empirical research on the topic, a working definition of 'assessment' for this research is required.

2.2.6 Contemplating and identifying a definition of assessment

This research seeks to answer the following research question outlined in Chapter One:

What is the perception of post-primary assessment among students and parents in a case study school in Ireland during a period of simultaneous continuity and reform?

In order to answer this question appropriately, a working definition of 'assessment' is required for this research, as assessment can mean many things to many people (Newton, 2007). For example, in his research on assessment, New Zealand researcher Gavin Brown (2017) lists the following in his research instrument:

Unplanned Observation
Oral Question & Answer
Planned Observation (e.g., Running Record, Checklist)
Student Written Work (e.g., activity sheets, spelling or math facts)
Student Self or Peer Assessment
Conferencing
Portfolio / Scrapbook
Teacher-Made Written Test
Standardised Test
Essay Test
1-3 Hour Examination

From the above, it is clear that a broad spectrum of assessment exists, from unplanned observations possibly in the classroom, or indeed outside the classroom, to a three-hour examination. However, for the purpose of this research, a broad definition of assessment may be problematic where the perspectives of both students and parents are concerned. For example, there are a number of daily activities that a student experiences which he or she may or may not perceive as being an assessment along a continuum or a spectrum (Brown, 2017; Darmody, 2017). It is therefore necessary for a clear definition of assessment within this research, a definition which may be clearly understood by parents and students, for the researcher to utilise the data from both groups effectively.

In the Irish context, two formal assessments are immediately identifiable as clear. They are the state-certified assessments, namely the Junior Cycle assessment and the Leaving Certificate. These formal assessments should be included in the definition of assessment for this research. In addition, a range of 'local' or school-based assessments are also highly identifiable, as they involve reporting home at intervals during the academic year. This involves Christmas, February and summer assessments. Finally, the post-primary entrance assessment is included in the definition of assessment for this research, as it was mentioned by the Inspectorate in the first instance (DES, 2016g; DES, 2016h), and as it drove this research in the second instance, and is absent from independent research, as discussed in Section 2.2.4. In order to narrow the definition of assessment for the purpose

of this research, the case study school calendar of events was consulted (Appendix G). Within this document, assessments during term 1 ('Christmas Assessments'), term 2 ('February Assessments') and term 3 ('Summer Assessments') were planned. As these assessments were clearly defined and identifiable in the case study school calendar, it is these assessments that are included in the definition of assessment for this research. In summary, assessment is defined as including the following structured sets of assessments for the purpose of this research:

- Entrance assessment (undertaken prior to joining the post-primary school)
- Junior Cycle/Junior Certificate assessments (including any assessment which contributes directly to certification, including CBAs and assessment tasks)
- Leaving Certificate assessment (including orals and practical assessments)
- Christmas assessments (which are undertaken by all students in the case study school except for Transition Year)
- February assessments (which are undertaken by all students in the case study school except for Transition Year)
- Summer assessments (which are undertaken by all students in the case study school except for Transition Year)

It is acknowledged that assessment during Transition Year is not included in this definition as there are no assessments planned for TY on the case study school calendar. However, it will be interesting to ascertain the opinions of stakeholders on the absence of these assessments during their Transition Year. It is also acknowledged by the researcher that the definition of 'assessment' as discussed above is a narrow definition, particularly in the context of Brown's eleven elements of assessment outlined above (2017). However, it is also recognised that 'the vast majority of schools highlighted the need for a greater variety of assessment methods' (Banks et al., 2018, p.20). In addition, Hyland (2011, p.6) is concerned that, despite the development of globalisation (as discussed in Chapter One), post-primary assessment has continued 'with monotonous regularity during the past 50 years' (2011, p.6). Indeed, the researcher recognises the need within the Irish post-primary system for a revised definition of assessment. However, it is stakeholders' views on the 'monotonous regularity' of continuity in the context of the newly reformed Junior Cycle that is the focus of this research. As a result, the researcher utilised the above definition of assessment for the purpose of this research.

2.3 Research on stakeholder voice in education

This section outlines contemporary empirical research carried out on the topic of the inclusion of stakeholder voice in education. Section 2.3.1 provides a discussion on the term 'stakeholders' and defines the stakeholders referred to in this research. Section 2.3.2 presents an overview of teacher voice as a group of stakeholders who are relatively well represented in contemporary empirical research. Section 2.3.3 discusses prior research undertaken on student and parent voice. Section 2.3.4 addresses the observed gaps in research on stakeholder voice, and Section 2.3.5 provides a rationale for undertaking this case study research, which seeks to analyse assessment, through an evaluation of stakeholder perspectives, during a time of continuity and reform within Irish post-primary education.

2.3.1 Introducing the concept of the 'stakeholder' in education

As introduced in Chapter One, Freeman is recognised as being responsible for introducing the term 'stakeholder' to business management discourse towards the end of the 20th century (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997) and defined stakeholders as 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives' (1984, p.46). In accepting and adapting the term and the concept of a 'stakeholder' within discussions relating to education, numerous stakeholders may be identified. Stakeholders of education include students, parents, inspectors, employers, policymakers and others (Mitchell et al., 1997). Indeed, it could be argued that every human being, as a citizen of the global 21st-century world, is a stakeholder of education. This research is concerned with what Alkin (2018) classifies as the 'primary stakeholders' in education, namely students and parents. In using the term 'stakeholder' in this research, as noted in Chapter One, the researcher is referring to both post-primary students and their parents. Where appropriate, this research also refers to 'student voice' and 'parent voice' as independent concepts.

2.3.2 Research on stakeholder voice: Teachers

This section provides a critical account of research undertaken on teacher voice within systems of education worldwide. Where assessment is concerned, the voice of teachers is well represented in international research (Bragg, 2007; Gardner and Galanouli, 2016;

Segers and Tillema, 2011; Demetriou and Wilson, 2010). To name one example, Professor Gavin Brown has visited and revisited this area within the New Zealand context on a number of occasions (Brown, 2002; 2004; 2006; 2008; 2009; 2011). Brown's initial research explored teachers' perspectives of assessment (2002), while subsequent research investigated the implications of perspectives of assessment for national education policy (2004) and documented tensions between the needs of schools and students as regards assessment (Harris and Brown, 2009). Hence, in the New Zealand context, the perspectives of teachers towards assessment are well represented.

In Ireland, the Department of Education and Skills is keen to include teacher voice in all aspects of evaluation (2006, 2009, 2016b). For example, teachers are consulted by the NCCA with regard to developments in the area of curriculum and assessment (NCCA, 2020d; 2020a). In addition, where independent empirical research in the area of teacher voice is concerned, outside of formal state departments and agencies, Darmody (2017) built on international research on the topic and produced a comprehensive quantitative study on the perspectives of teachers in the Irish post-primary content. In this research, Darmody captured the perspectives of teachers at the very beginning of the introduction of Junior Cycle reform in post-primary schools, a critical time in the evolution of the Irish post-primary system, as discussed. In analysing this study conducted by Darmody, the researcher was motivated to investigate whether the same level of representation in research for other stakeholders was evident at such a critical time in the Irish educational landscape; specifically, were the perspectives of students and parents similarly represented?

2.3.3 Research on stakeholder voice: Students and parents

The extent to which research on stakeholder voice is included in contemporary empirical research is a critical issue within this research. This section first outlines contemporary international and Irish research concerning student voice, before outlining previous research undertaken on parent voice. Student voice is well represented in contemporary international literature (Demetriou and Wilson, 2010; Ferguson et al., 2011; Beattie, 2012). This may be due to increasing international policy developments, as will be highlighted in Chapter Four of this research. Contemporary international research advocates for the inclusion of student voice in education, and student voice is heralded as

powerful and integral to improving schools (Demetrious and Wilson, 2010; Fielding and Ruddock, 2002).

In the Irish context, GUI research indicates that 62% of 20-year-olds are attending further/higher education (GUI, 2019, p.3). This statistic is consistent with Hyland's (2011) observation that the number of entrants from post-primary to higher education in Ireland in 2010 equated to approximately 65% of the cohort. Hence, the proportion of students continuing with education from post-primary education to university is high which shows that students are engaged with the system and the process of education in Ireland. The GUI research (2019) also found that young people in Ireland seek to actively participate in discussion and planning (GUI, 2019). With such a large proportion of students engaging and continuing with education, and indeed, with others not engaging nor continuing, it is essential for researchers to understand the factors leading to decision-making within the system. As noted by the Irish Second-level Students Union (ISSU), it is argued that students are well placed to articulate and represent their own views on education, and that they should be partners in the realisation of their journey through the process (2010).

A review of contemporary empirical literature found that, while student voice is a difficult concept to define (Fleming, 2013), it is well represented within research regarding education in general. For example, as early as 2001, postgraduate case study research carried out by Dempsey (2001) highlighted the benefits of involving student voice in all aspects of the Transition Year programme. O'Keeffe (2009) researched and represented the voice of students with moderate general learning disability, including their experiences of mainstream schools advocating increased student voice among minority groups. Regarding whole-school evaluations, Conneely (2015) researched the right of student voice to be included and considered. More recently, Fleming carried out extensive research on student voice in general with regard to all daily aspects and the organisation of post-primary schools (2011; 2013; 2015). In addition, regarding national policy, student voice has been actively incorporated into the Senior Cycle review (NCCA, 2018). Hence, it is observed that student voice is well represented where post-primary education in general is concerned. However, research in the area of student voice and contemporary processes of assessment has not been conducted; a gap exists in the literature.

Unlike student voice, where the inclusion of parent voice is concerned, an absence of large-scale international research is evident. For example, the OECD has neither researched nor published on the topic. Smaller-scale research on the topic of parental

involvement in education and assessment has been carried out, however, and a general focus on the problem of inclusion, particularly concerning social class, is clearly evident (Hanafin and Lynch, 2002; Addi-Raccah and Ainhoren, 2009). In the Irish context, postgraduate research in the area of whole-school development with parental involvement was undertaken towards the end of the 20th century (Conaty, 1999). This research also focused on socioeconomic disadvantage and the role and impact of the home school liaison representative in engaging with parents. In addition, for the Irish context, a relatively contemporary research study of parental involvement in Irish post-primary education was carried out by the ESRI and was funded by the NCCA (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). This research found that parents are, in general, actively involved in the lives and the education of their children (ibid). This was also observed by GL Assessment (2010, p.129), which conducted market research on the CAT4 psychometric assessment: 'Many parents will naturally be interested in all aspects of their child's performance at school, including their CAT4 results'. Prior research – for example, the NCCA consultation on Senior Cycle – found that parents are interested in the holistic development of their child (Banks et al., 2018). However, in contrast, the levels of involvement in post-primary decision-making are found to be low (ibid). In 2011, postgraduate research investigated the perspectives of parents with regard to whole-school evaluation and found that parents became disenfranchised with the process (Dillon, 2012). Similarly, Kelaghan et al. (2004) found that a majority of parents felt they had little influence on education. In addition, Darmody and Smyth (2013, p.93) state that parental attendance at parent meetings (outside of parent-teacher meetings) is 'modest'. Hence, research on parent participation has shown a complexity and an inconsistency between the declared level of interest of parents and the active participation of parents in school and student evaluation systems. While research on parent voice has been undertaken sporadically within the Irish context, it is noted by the researcher that: (i) there is a general absence of contemporary international or large-scale research with regard to parent voice, and (ii) there is an absence of research with regard to parent voice and assessment within the Irish post-primary education system.

2.3.4 Gaps identified in the research on stakeholder voice

As outlined in Sections 2.3.2 and 2.3.3, stakeholder voice has been included to an extent in contemporary empirical research. However, as Fleming (2011, 2013) notes, despite research on the topic, it is difficult to measure whether any level of stakeholder voice is

adequately heard. Nonetheless, the voices of teachers, in particular, are well represented in both international and Irish research. In relation to students and parents as stakeholders, the following gaps are identified by the researcher:

- A lack of contemporary research exists in relation to student voice in the area of assessment.
- A lack of contemporary research exists in relation to parent voice with regard to many aspects of education, including assessment.
- The perspectives of stakeholders during this pivotal time in education (the reform of the Junior Cycle amidst the continuity of the Senior Cycle) are of vital importance in the context of contemporary international and national policy, which will be outlined in Chapter Three. An absence of research in this area is a gap where the perspectives of stakeholders at this key time in education is concerned.
- An in-depth study into the perspectives of parents and students in a single case study school has not been carried out in the Irish context to date.

In relation to these identified gaps, it is noted that stakeholder voice in education is an emerging process (Fleming, 2015). Hence, this research seeks to explore these identified gaps concerning stakeholder voice and post-primary assessment.

2.3.5 Rationale for including stakeholder voice in this research

A review of the empirical literature on stakeholder voice and assessment was provided in Sections 2.3.2 and 2.3.3, and the gaps in contemporary research were identified in Section 2.3.4. Additional research on stakeholder voice highlights a further rationale for including stakeholder voice in research, as will be outlined in this section.

From a theoretical point of view, stakeholders can play a prominent role in Education (Cousins and Earl, 1992; Fielding, 2004). However, contemporary research on the Irish education system denotes a reluctance to incorporate student and parent voice in aspects of education. For example, research undertaken by the ESRI (Smyth, 2018) notes that teachers are concerned they may lose their authority. In addition, Fielding (2004) found that teachers and other members of a school community may agree with this perspective and may believe that student voice is not important, relevant or appropriate. A review of the NCCA website highlights a general lack of availability of 'publications and research' on student voice. At the time of writing, the NCCA has an allocated 'Publications and

Research' section on its website, which includes the subheading 'Consultation Reports'. However, no such reports are available within this section.

Where structures within the Irish post-primary education system are concerned, student councils have come into being in many schools (DES, 2002). However, Fleming (2015, p.235) found that student councils are tokenistic and contrived. This is not acceptable in a system where national school self-evaluation guidelines recognise and advocate for the inclusion of key stakeholders such as students and parents (DES, 2016d). In addition, despite the creation of parent councils, the home-school-liaison scheme and the SSE guidelines (2016d), 'little evidence' exists to prove that parental involvement has improved (Fleming, 2016). Most significantly, it is found that students are consulted where issues such as school uniforms and school events are concerned, but not with regard to school self-evaluation nor the school improvement process. This is especially interesting given the broad purpose of school evaluation as a mechanism to investigate the extent of success of teaching and leadership within schools (Donaldson, 2013). Indeed, consulting students or asking for their opinions is not common in Irish schools (Fleming, 2011). Parents have an interest and involvement in their child's education at an information level, yet formal collaboration is passive (Byrne and Smith, 2011). The lack of perceived inclusion of stakeholder voice is problematic, as stakeholder voice is linked with wellbeing. Fleming (2013, p.viii) has found, for example, that it promotes 'positive findings in the context of relationships, pedagogical change and students' engagement, participation and achievement'. In addition, stakeholder voice is a principle which is central to democratic principles and imperative to active citizenship (Fleming, 2013). Hence, it is argued that it is vitally important to continue to research and evaluate education through stakeholder perceptions.

2.4 Chapter summary and conclusion

This chapter outlined prior empirical research in the area of post-primary assessment and stakeholder voice. An overview of research carried out both internationally and within the Irish post-primary system has highlighted a number of areas requiring contemporary research. In particular, as noted in Section 2.2.2, a general absence of research in the area of assessment other than on the Leaving Certificate is evident. Little or no research on the Irish system of post-primary assessment is available on entrance assessments, with the exception of research carried out by the commercial test provider itself. In addition,

research on the topic of ‘in-house’ or ‘local’ post-primary assessments such as Christmas and summer assessments is not visible within contemporary empirical research. Regarding the relationship between post-primary assessments, Smyth (2011) observes that Junior and Leaving Certificate exam grades are highly correlated. However, the correlations between other assessments within post-primary have not been independently researched. Similarly, as discussed in Section 2.3, parent and student perspectives of assessment have not been researched to a large extent, particularly where the contemporary system of post-primary assessment is concerned. As a response to these identified gaps in contemporary empirical research, this research provides a case study analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education through an evaluation of stakeholder perspectives during a pivotal time. Assessment in the post-primary system is changing and the Junior Certificate is being phased out, replaced by Junior Cycle assessment, while Senior Cycle assessment processes remain. Indeed, this research will add to the body of research in the areas of assessment and stakeholder voice within the Irish post-primary system at a key period within the evolution of the system: a period of simultaneous continuity and reform. This chapter provides a foundation for this research by identifying gals in contemporary empirical research. Chapters Three and Four will add to the foundation provided in this chapter by outlining a review of the wider literature and contemporary policy in relation to the areas of assessment and stakeholder voice.

Chapter Three: Literature review & theoretical framework

3.1 Introduction

Chapter Two provided an overview of contemporary empirical research in the areas of assessment and stakeholder voice, focusing on second-level education. This chapter builds on Chapter Two and addresses some of the key aspects introduced in Chapter One by providing a review of the wider literature on contemporary education, assessment and stakeholder voice. Through the literature review, this chapter outlines key contextual issues upon which assessment policy and stakeholder voice policy are based, both of which are addressed in Chapter Four. In addition, following a review of the wider literature, this chapter outlines key theoretical perspectives on assessment and provides a framework of analysis for this research.

This chapter begins by systematically describing and analysing the published body of knowledge on the global systems of education, particularly with regard to the purpose of education as it has emerged in the 21st century. Section 3.3 subsequently addresses literature pertaining specifically to the Irish system of education, while Section 3.4 addresses key theoretical perspectives and the perspective chosen for this research, which is vital in order to organise all aspects of this research.

3.2 Contemporary education around the globe

This section discusses contemporary education as it is described and presented in the broader literature. This section outlines the narrative on education, assessment and stakeholder voice represented in the broader literature in order to contextualise discussion on the Irish system which is presented in Section 3.3. In order to contextualise the global context of assessment (Section 3.2.2) and the global context of stakeholder voice (Section 3.2.3) a general discussion of global education is firstly presented in Section 3.2.1.

3.2.1 Global education as represented in the wider literature

As noted in Section 1.2.1, Globalisation had a significant and direct impact on nation states all over the world. Globalisation initially led to the development of economic relationships between states, where a complex interdependency, cooperation and competitiveness subsequently emerged (Wong; 2010; Zajda, 2018; Winter, 2012; Brown et al., 2016a). Globalisation quickly led to a need for quality education systems as the preparation and production of an educated workforce for industry became a prerequisite

not only for individual nation states, but also for unions of states, such as those which first formed the European and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951. Indeed, the ECSC is an excellent example of a union of nation states which came together initially due to shared economic goals but which evolved into a more complex, interdependent, cooperative union; it developed a number of subsequent treaties, initiatives and policies on social, educational and political issues as the continuously evolving European Union (EU). Policy at an EU level will be addressed in Chapter Four. However, for the purpose of this chapter, which focuses on the wider literature, it is noted that reform occurs regularly in Europe through policy and publications, and member states are required to review their national system in relation to changes at EU level (Roth and Thum, 2010). Indeed, national systems of education are integral to the evolution of 21st-century economic and social systems, as they contribute directly to the power of an economy through their national workforce (OECD, 2005, 2014, 2018; Kocmanová, 2007; Winter, 2012). While education is important at the level of the state, it is also important at the level of an individual. There is a clear motivation for achieving an education, as individuals increase their competencies and marketable skills, which leads to enhanced personal opportunity on an international playing field (Roth and Thum, 2010; Torrance, 2007; Gardner and Galanouli, cited in Wyse, 2016; OECD, 2018c). Indeed, significant opportunity for the individual is granted through national education systems (OECD, 2014, 2018, 2018c).

High-quality education systems are advantageous for nation states and for the individual, as economic opportunities are enhanced leading to greater social stability. A primary mechanism for measuring quality within education is recognised in the wider literature: systems of assessment within global systems of education amongst developed countries produce assessment data. Statistical analysis of this data allows for evaluation and comparison of systems. Indeed, Gorard (2006) observes that the measurement of school performance has become so dominant globally that it occupies an entire field of research. Literature pertaining to the evaluation of education systems through systems of assessment is explored in Section 3.2.2, below.

3.2.2 Global context of assessment as represented in the wider literature

This section outlines important international approaches to systems of assessment and the use of assessment data as represented in the wider literature. Just as globalisation

impacted upon and shaped the evolution of education worldwide, as noted in the previous section, so, too, did globalisation shape assessment theory and practice within education. For example, Bloom et al. (1971) observed that the primary purpose of 20th-century assessment within education was for the purpose of the segregation and selection of students as a mechanism for the distribution of opportunity. During this time, assessment was integral to systems of education, and indeed systems of society, being likened to a tail wagging the dog of the curriculum (Hargreaves, 1989). Assessment results continue to be utilised in many countries as a means to a right of entry to further education and employment (Gardner, 2011; William, 2007). However, during the late 20th century and early 21st century, an additional systematic and summative focus on the evaluation of education systems, for the purposes of transparency, accountability and continuous improvement, became 'a governing philosophy' within education and assessment policy development (Brown et al., 2016, p.20). Indeed, by the end of the 20th century, the use of assessment data for the purpose of evaluation was well-documented in the literature (Resnick and Resnick, 1992; Gips, 1994). In addition to the statistical quantification of education, terminology such as 'accountability', 'transparency', 'benchmarking', 'deregulation', 'decentralisation', 'value for money', 'quality assurance' and 'risk-based analysis targets' became widely used with regard to education, whereas this type of language was more traditionally associated with private enterprise (Brown et al., 2016). Using assessment results as summative data provides an opportunity to quantify and to subsequently compare and contrast international systems of education. Indeed, assessment data is utilised in many countries internationally for this purpose (Coburn and Talbert, 2006). Where this type of approach has been adopted, authors note two broadly overarching purposes: (i) accountability and (ii) measurable improvement of teaching and learning (Darmody, 2017; Black, 1998; Pellegrino et al., 2001; Newton, 2007; Brown, 2008).

While contemporary policy relating to assessment will be presented in Chapter Four, one such policy is mentioned in this chapter as an example to demonstrate documented discussions and reflections on policy as identified in the wider literature. In the United States, the 2001 *No Child Left Behind Act* involved quantitative statistical modelling, with clear consequences for students/teachers and schools not achieving desired numbers. Rubin et al. (2004) explain the intricacies of this statistical model and illustrate the processes of value-added modelling (VAM), which involves the allocation of a numerical value output to students for the purpose of grade prediction and evaluation of aspects of

the system. This process and the allocated numerical value output assigned to students or groups of students encapsulate what may be defined as a 'value-added' approach to an education system, for the purpose of accountability. Models of statistical quantification relating to the 'value added' within education vary in complexity, and they include different statistical specifications (Amrein-Beardsley, 2008; Tekwe et al., 2004). When VAM was first introduced as a measure of accountability, transparency and evaluation within systems of education, it was understood to be a stimulating advance (Ballou, 2004; Tekwe et al., 2004). Two decades later, at the beginning of the 21st century, the trend of evaluating school effects based on detailed quantitative analysis of student assessment data has become a staple of school systems in the USA (Coburn and Truner, 2011; Farrell, 2014; Lai and MacNaughton, 2016). The integration of VAM into the US education system is one example of the integration of summative quantification of learning and the extent to which it is combined into systems of education as identified in the wider literature. Indeed, throughout the developed world, international systems of education are increasing the use of data-informed decision-making (Mausethagen et al., 2018; Coburn and Turner, 2011; Cosner, 2011). It must be noted that, at a local level, some teachers reject summative approaches to assessment as they are poor indicators of student progress (Springer et al., 2010). Irrespective of local concerns, the trend of evaluating the quality of institutions based on detailed quantitative analysis of student assessment data has become widespread practice internationally (Tekwe et al., 2004).

It is proposed that the numerical summative values which can be allocated to students, teachers and schools are highly desirable for policymakers and evaluators of education worldwide, as this approach allows for quantification and direct comparison of education systems in a manner which may more typically be associated with a business model, as discussed (Ballou et al., 2004; Tekwe et al., 2004). Indeed, Shen et al. (2010) note that principals use data in order to primarily focus on accountability. This finding is shared by Prøitz et al. (2017, p.49), who conclude that the use of data in education 'seems to be more oriented towards the structures of governance and management than the processes of teaching and learning'. Amrein-Beardsley (2008) argues that assessment is an important mechanism for informing students and teachers of relative positions occupied in the peer group. However, Nusche (cited in Wyse, Hayward, and Pandya, 2016) argues that the evaluation of education through assessment data presents education systems with a 'major challenge for curriculum theory in the twenty-first century' (p.3). Mausethagen (2020) also argues that the use of assessment data in education is a reductionist view of

teaching and learning. Contrastingly, however, other authors note that assessment supports individuals with their learning (Cook, 1951; Gronlund, 1998: Brown, 2008; Harlen, 2005; Barnes et al., 2015). Throughout the literature, it is clear that authors recognise the benefits of utilising assessment data for the purpose of evaluation as outlined above. However, a number of key issues which require consideration are also identified by authors as follows:

Ensuring reliability, validity, and the accurate calculation of results

Matthews (2010) demonstrates that models of assessment involve a variety of key practical, technical and philosophical issues. Assessment tools must be reliable and valid if the assessment results are to be used appropriately (Gorard, 2010). Interestingly, with regard to VAM as discussed, the American Statistical Association (2014) notes that statistical models have not been found to accurately predict long-range learning outcomes. This is highly significant in the context of the use of assessment data where measurement of quality, reliability and validity are concerned. Hence, it is argued that if assessment data is to be used to summate value added, to measure quality or to illustrate effectiveness of teaching and learning, the data must be carefully and accurately calculated and all processes must be statistically reliable and valid.

The actual use of data and interpretation/definition of results

Hardy (2014) recognises that the use of data can validate or destroy a system. However, numbers are constructs, and perspective plays a role in their use, interpretation and presentation. According to the American Statistical Association (2014), statistical models of evaluation require well-defined statistical expertise for appropriate interpretation. This is important for all uses of assessment data, but it is particularly important with regard to any data deemed suitable for use as baseline data. In addition, appropriate interpretation also requires expertise of local models of education and that statistical expertise alone is insufficient.

Inconsistency between assessment data and student ability

Prince et al. (2009) observe that it is exceptionally difficult to measure learning. To provide one example of this, Kohn (2000) describes a scenario whereby an incorrect

answer on a marking scheme may not signify an absence of understanding. It is argued that assessments are often limited in terms of actually or accurately evaluating learning.

Assessment used in isolation

No one assessment can provide reliable and valid information on the actual holistic ability of a person. Demonstrating awareness of this, Mausethagen et al. (2018, p.37) note that teachers in the Norwegian post-primary system use 'several knowledge sources' in their results meetings, with short-term grade forecasting and tracking in focus.

The misuse of test instruments

Assessment data may be used for purposes other than what the assessment was actually designed to measure (Popham, 1999). In the Irish context, psychometric tests are being used to set baseline data for students and set medium- and long-term goals for the journey through post-primary education. This is not in line with the circular outlining the appropriate use of said instruments (DES, 2019g). Multiple concerns exist regarding the ethical use of assessment data. Indeed, Alkin (2018) demonstrates that processes of evaluation often create undesired and counterproductive effects. Particularly, early labelling of students is problematic.

In conclusion, regarding assessment, it is clear that conflicting views are present in the literature where the use of data is concerned. This research is concerned with an evaluation of assessment through the perspective of stakeholders (parents and students). This research provides an analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education through the evaluation of stakeholder perceptions. Prior to investigating the Irish context, however, an overview of the global context of stakeholder voice, as identified in the literature, is presented in the next section.

3.2.3 Global context of stakeholder voice

Policy measures undertaken to enhance the rights-based approach of stakeholders will be outlined in Chapter Four. This section is concerned with outlining key issues pertaining to stakeholder voice within the international landscape as identified in the literature. Towards the end of the 20th century, arguments for the inclusion of student voice in

education began to emerge in the wider literature. For example, Deborah Meier, author of numerous books, and a senior scholar of New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, described the concept of students having a right to their own personal educational journey as revolutionary, radical and wonderful (Meier, 1995). However, it must be noted that the processes involved in including stakeholder voice are identified in the wider literature as being layered and complex. For example, the inclusion of stakeholder voice in education is not only concerned with the speaking and hearing of words; the impact of opportunity, presence, power and the agency of the words must also be considered, which is not a simple task (Cook-Sather, 2006). Some individuals or groups typically express themselves more loudly than others, and some do not express themselves at all (Habermas, 1991; Bosaki 2005; Gunter and Thomson, 2007). In addition, Bosaki (2003) proposes that stakeholder involvement can be passive or active, along a continuum. This proposal is confirmed by Fielding (2004), who notes that some voices may be disproportionately recalcitrant, while other voices may be entirely absent. In writing about the culture of silence in the classroom, Bosaki (2005) proposes that silence may be a symbol of multiple potential meanings: it may indicate powerlessness on the part of stakeholders, or it may represent the unwillingness of a stakeholder to express his or her voice (Bosaki, 2005). Fear concerning the confidentiality of one's contribution may also be an issue, with some stakeholders reluctant to provide entirely truthful/complete answers to questions or opinions on certain subjects for fear that the information may be damaging or detrimental (Ofsted, 2010). Hence, it is difficult to know the circumstances under which stakeholder voice may be accepted as a true representation of the perspective.

Even in cases where a stakeholder's voice is accepted, further difficulties can emerge. For example, it is difficult to consider which voices should induce action. Stakeholders have different needs; they face different barriers, and they may have varying conceptualisations of engagement (LaRocque et al., 2011). McIntyre et al. (2015) propose that the presence or absence, and the acceptance or non-acceptance, of stakeholder voice may inadvertently serve as a 'dividing practice' that segregates one cohort of stakeholders from another. Robinson and Taylor (2012, p.38) identify that some stakeholders are consistently included, while others are not. Hence, it is acknowledged that the legislation of stakeholder participation in government policy, as will be outlined in Chapter Four, may not always guarantee authentic or representative participation (Byrne and Smyth, 2011). Indeed, the overall level or extent of inclusion of stakeholder voice in education is

problematic. Rodger Hart (1989) developed a typology of stakeholder voice and levels of participation based on his research on student voice. Figure 1, below, was designed by the researcher to illustrate Hart's understanding and visual representation of the levels of inclusion of stakeholder voice. Hart's ladder (1992) offers a measure of participation, where steps on a ladder symbolise levels of participation on a scale from one to eight. Hart's model depicts eight stages of inclusion. The first three steps on the ladder are stages within which disingenuous attempts are made by authorities to include stakeholder participation. However, with every increasing step on the ladder, stakeholders become incrementally liberated from the control of others. Hart (1992) constructed the ladder metaphor based on his research on student participation. However, it is proposed that a parallel structure and spectrum of participation may also apply to parents within the education system.

Figure 1: Depiction of Hart's Ladder of Participation

(Adapted by the researcher from Hart, 1989)

Throughout the globe, the literature reveals that Hart's ladder of participation is applicable to 21st-century education with regard to stakeholder voice. For example, a defensive approach to the inclusion of stakeholder voice has been adopted in some international systems (Cook-Sather, 2006; Smyth, 2006a; Fielding, 2004). Previous research on the Israeli system conducted by Addi-Raccah and Ainhoren (2009) indicates that teachers' least favoured school context is one in which parents are empowered. However, at the other end of the spectrum, some countries, such as Australia (Australian Capital Territories Act, 2004) and New Zealand (The New Zealand Education Act, 1989) recognise students and parents as legitimate members of the school board.

While some gains have been made on the international landscape, Ruddock (2006, p.133) argues that the overall inclusion of stakeholder participation in global systems of education is a 'zeitgeist commitment'. This is not the view of the researcher, however, as international developments on stakeholder voice are consistently evolving in favour of the development and integration of stakeholder voice. This will be demonstrated in relation to the continuously evolving national and international policy context explored in Chapter Four. However, while it is argued that the overall participation of stakeholders extends beyond a zeitgeist commitment, a number of barriers to the inclusion of stakeholder voice are identified in the wider literature:

(i) Language and established culture

A major barrier to the participation of parents and students is that of language and the established culture of inclusion. Robinson and Taylor (2007) argue that stakeholder voice cannot be effectively obtained as a result. For Harris and Goodall (2008), it is not merely within language that the difficulty lies, but rather, individuals in powerful positions within the system do not actually know how to effectively engage with stakeholder participation authentically. For example, it is argued that many students may be too inexperienced and/or immature to provide a well-rounded, long-term view of their own education and the education of others (Lodge, 2005). Similarly, Robinson and Taylor (2007) observe that the language of management and decision-makers can be debilitating and may hinder the inclusion of stakeholder voice. Focusing on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, Robinson and Taylor (2007) argue that the linguistic codes involved in all sides of participation result in bias due to the cultural framework involved. Fleming (2015) also hypothesises that voice and culture can be barriers to participation, and therefore to

positive results. As a result, certain individuals may struggle to articulate their firmly held opinions, as the use and comprehension of language potentially involve difficulty and a culture clash (Fielding and Ruddock, 2002). The use of 'stakeholder voice' as a term in the singular inappropriately indicates that there is only one monolithic voice to be heard (Robinson and Taylor, 2007; Cook-Sather, 2006). However, a spectrum of voice is more likely.

(ii) National and local systemic structures

The very foundation for the inclusion of stakeholder voice is challenged by some authors throughout the wider literature. Stakeholders typically have little awareness of their lack of skill or proficiency in any area concerning the first stage of learning (Broadwell, 1969). Harvey and Green (1993, p.21) argue that stakeholders 'may not be in a position to judge whether their needs are being met', and that trained professionals are best placed to assess student needs and to teach. Indeed, Harris and Goodall (2008) argue that there is little evidence indicating the impact of the inclusion of stakeholder voice on subsequent learning. Similarly, Freeman (1994) asks how solid, reliable and valid the inclusion of stakeholder voice within education is.

Lodge and Lynch (2000) observe that teachers are accustomed to being in control. The inclusion of stakeholder voice challenges this control (Bragg, 2007b). In-depth research on this issue was carried out by Addi-Raccah and Arviv-Elyahiv (2008, p.403) in the Israeli system. Teachers 'expressed concern and distress' about stakeholders' increasing voice, power and control. In order for stakeholder voice to achieve levels of participation higher than those of tokenism, decoration and manipulation (Hart, 1992), genuine dialogue is required (Lodge, 2005; Westergard, 2007). A supportive and non-judgemental environment promoting mutual trust and respect between teachers and stakeholders needs to be established for the best outcome to occur. For example, the extent to which stakeholders feel welcome or unwelcome in the school community significantly shapes stakeholder activity, participation and contributions (Fleming, 2016; Freeman, 1984).

Despite the barriers to inclusion of stakeholder voice as outlined above, the inclusion of stakeholder voice in reflecting on the value of education is recognised in the wider literature as being advantageous for several interrelated reasons, as detailed below:

(i) To fully inform policymakers and educators

Stakeholder contributions are vital for informing research and development in education (Cook-Sather, 2006). Stakeholders are aware of the practical, lived experience within national and local systems. It is vitally important for the view of primary stakeholders to be included in research and decision-making, as other stakeholders, such as policymakers, may not be fully aware of the practical lived experience (Clegg et al., 2013).

(ii) To enhance and ensure timely progress and improve standards

Inclusion of stakeholder voice facilitates progress within systems of education. (Mitra, 2006). Enhanced dialogue and effective communication involving stakeholders signal engagement and enhance cooperation (Cook-Sather, 2006). These, in turn, facilitate the co-construction of education, which is advantageous in terms of participation, motivation and 'buy-in' (Fleming, 2013).

(iii) To nourish effective leadership and decision-making

Awareness of the stakeholder position enhances effective educational leadership, as it can contribute to inclusive decision-making (Mitchell et al., 1997; Brazer et al., 2006). In particular, McNamara and O'Hara (2012) suggest that the inclusion of stakeholder perspectives will provide additional and key information on the needs of the community of learners. Essentially, in including primary stakeholder voice, the system of education can directly respond to the needs and concerns of primary stakeholders. Primary stakeholders can be 'expert witnesses' on levels of quality within the system in which they interact (Lodge, 2005, p.130).

(iv) Development and honing of a lifelong skill set

Participation by stakeholders can be empowering for some and can provide experiential learning for all involved. Processes involved in all aspects of communication with stakeholders facilitate lifelong learning. All participants hone essential key skills required for life (Fielding and Ruddock, 2002; Cook-Sather, 2006). Including stakeholder voice in all aspects of education may potentially yield contemporaneous results; the system itself and stakeholders of the system benefit.

As reflection on the four points above has shown, while a number of barriers are identified in the wider literature where stakeholder voice is concerned, there is also strong support for the inclusion of stakeholder voice in education.

3.2.4 Contemporary education around the globe: Conclusion

This section provides a review of international literature relating to education, second-level assessment and stakeholder voice. With regard to the education system at large, accountability and transparency have emerged as significant for national education systems. This has had an impact on assessment, as various means of assessment are used to measure quality within education systems. Where stakeholder voice is concerned, Hart's ladder (1992) depicts the potential levels of integration of stakeholder voice in education. International systems, while all operating in a 21st-century global landscape, with shared economic goals, encourage and include the integration of stakeholder voice to a different extent. In addition, within the literature, a number of challenges and benefits with regard to integrating stakeholder voice into all aspects of education are identified. This section (3.2) reviewed the literature pertaining to the international approach to education, assessment and stakeholder voice in order to set the international context for Section 3.3, which addresses a review of the literature from an Irish context.

3.3 Irish context of education, assessment and stakeholder voice

This section builds on the literature review provided on the global context as discussed in the previous section by focusing on the Irish system of education, post-primary assessment, and stakeholder voice as it is presented in the wider literature. Section 3.3.1 outlines the educational context within Ireland in terms of its purpose and the mechanisms of evaluation within the system. The role of assessment data in post-primary education in Ireland is discussed in Section 3.3.2. Finally, stakeholder voice in relation to the Irish post-primary system is discussed in relation to the literature.

3.3.1 The Irish education system

As discussed in Section 3.2.1, economic developments on a global scale have led to a need for an educated workforce amongst international nation states, and Ireland is no exception. For example, the year 2017 saw a significant increase in employment in Ireland, and the rate of unemployment fell to 6.7% (McNaboe et al., 2018). The native workforce in Ireland was not sufficient to meet the demands of the economic development occurring in the country, and over 9,000 individuals from outside of the European Economic Area were sourced for employment in Ireland (ibid). Notwithstanding the outsourcing of employment, the system of education in Ireland continues to produce an indigenous workforce. In order to maximise the effectiveness of the Irish education system, a dual system of school self-evaluation and inspections is operated (Brown et al., 2016, 2018; DES, 2012b). Dual systems of evaluation are recognised as having the potential to be more effective, as the flaws inherent in a single system of evaluation may be counteracted (McNamara et al., 2004). Interestingly, formal evaluation of the Irish education system up to the early 1990s, towards the end of the 20th century, is described as 'irrelevant' (McNamara et al., 2004, p.60). However, a more impactful and relevant approach was adopted towards the turn of the century, in line with the global landscape, as outlined in Chapter One and in Section 3.2.1, and the education system in Ireland now employs what Brown et al. (2016, p.10) describe as 'intelligent accountability'. Again, in line with the global context, it is recognised in the literature that for the Irish system of education to be adequately evaluated, quality measurement is required (DES, 2011; Matthews, 2010; McNamara and O'Hara, 2005), mirroring the global approach as outlined in Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2. Indeed, similar to many global systems, a primary means of quality measurement for the purpose of accountability within the Irish education system is the use of assessment data.

3.3.2 The role of assessment data in post-primary education in Ireland

As discussed in Sections 3.2.1, 3.2.2 and noted in Section 3.3.1 above, the Irish education system is impacted by the global approach to education and accountability through summative assessment data. Two national state-run assessments are organised for students during their post-primary education experience, the Junior Cycle and the Leaving Certificate as the final assessment of post-primary schooling. In Ireland, summative grades are provided to students following their sitting of the Leaving Certificate. In

addition, a CAO points system is utilised for access into higher-education institutions. This points system will be outlined in detail in Chapter Four. However, for the purpose of the wider literature review, where quantification of the education system is concerned in relation to the purpose of summative measurement, it is acknowledged that grades acquired at Leaving Certificate level are translated to a quantity or grade understood nationally to reflect on the quality of the education obtained by an individual and the school attended. For example, Hyland (2011) argues that the Leaving Certificate is identified with and understood through the Central Application Office (CAO) points system, and observes that one's CAO points are cited as the response when individuals are asked how well they performed in their Leaving Certificate. Similarly, the most recent Growing Up in Ireland research described the cohort in question as having 'an average of 385 points in the CAO system' this number provides an understanding of the relativeness of any other score i.e. whether other students scored above or below the mean CAO points (GUI, 2019b, p.2). With regard to accountability, as discussed in the previous section with regard to international systems of education, the Leaving Certificate and the CAO points serve as a nationally understood currency where schools and perceived quality are relative and culturally understood.

The numbers of Irish students progressing from post-primary to higher education have increased significantly from approximately 4,500 per annum in the 1960s (Hyland, 2011, p.4) to 43,569 students in publicly funded universities, institutes and colleges in 2016/17 (HEA, 2018, p.1). The CAO describes the service it offers as impartial, honest, efficient and transparent in its mission statement (CAO, 2019). Nurturing the common understanding of the summative meaning of CAO points within the national culture is the national media. The *Irish Times*, for example, features an annual 'pull-out' section on feeder schools to Higher Education in Ireland as noted in Section 2.2.3 (O'Caollai, 2019). Banks et al. (2018, p.35) argue that the Leaving Certificate, in its current and established form, solely functions as a mechanism to 'get into college', after which it is 'meaningless' (Banks et al., 2018, p.35). For example, in 2018, the case study school chosen for this research (as will be outlined in detail in Chapter Five) was reported to have 83% of its students progressing to third level, and as a result, the school was ranked 18th out of 37 in its geographical region (*Irish Times*, 2018). This direct comparison, listing and ranking of schools in the league-table type approach nurtures culture around summative assessment, which impacts all stakeholders. Indeed, Banks and Smyth (2015) found that students frequently perceived teachers as pressurised in relation to the Leaving Certificate

assessment, and they suggest that teachers constantly emphasise the importance of the assessment. In addition, Banks et al. (2018) identify that students appreciate teachers who prepare them to achieve as high a grade as possible. A review of the literature also demonstrates that the nurtured culture around summative assessment within post-primary schools is problematic where student wellbeing is concerned. Baird et al. (2014) observe that feelings of stress are fundamental to all, while Banks et al. (2018, p.35) observe that students buy into the high-stakes culture of assessment so highly that it results in feelings of apprehension and fear. Banks and Smyth (2015) argue that post-primary students place such enormous weight on their performance in this assessment that stress was often experienced which was linked to fears of not achieving academic goals.

In addition to the pressure the Leaving Certificate exerts on stakeholders within the system, disagreement exists within the literature as to the 'fairness' of assessment for students within the system. Hyland (2011) argues that the Leaving Certificate assessment is neither a fair nor an equitable examination, as students who excel linguistically and logically are at a significant advantage. Baird et al. (2014) agree that homogeneity exists to a large extent within the contemporary Irish post-primary system. It is proposed that post-primary education in Ireland is unbalanced, as it emphasises the importance of two of Gardner's (2006) multiple intelligences. Logical/mathematical and linguistic intelligences are catered for, with an overall general absence of the other identified intelligences in relation to assessment (musical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist). The providers of the psychometric assessment CAT4 also identify that spatial ability and non-verbal reasoning assessments have been 'under-valued and under-assessed in schools' (GL Assessment, 2020, p.7). Indeed, GL Assessment (2020, p.8) notes that spatial ability in particular is neglected and that those individuals with ability in this area constitute 'an under-served population'. Hyland (2011) argues that subject syllabi should include and encourage critical engagement with content in order to support the use of higher-order thinking skills. In support of this, Baird et al. (2014, p.27) also note that consideration should be given to 'placing more emphasis upon the assessment of higher order thinking skills' in state assessment in Ireland, which would be in keeping with international trends in assessment. This approach would mirror that of the literature and the OECD compass for 2030, as will be discussed in Chapter Four. However, Banks et al. (2018) argue the opposite view, suggesting that the Leaving Certificate is standardised and is therefore perceived as a fair assessment. Similarly, the NCCA (2018a, p.8.) notes 'the objective, fair and highly-regarded nature of the current

examination system', which, it observes, is respected by parents, teachers and students. Built into the formal systems of assessment of education in Ireland is an appeals process whereby students can challenge and appeal a grade allocated in a state examination. This system of appeals was added in order to maximise a student-focused approach to the system of assessment. Indeed, in an article in the *Irish Times* from November 2019, former president of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors (IGC) Brian Mooney writes that the State Examination Commission (SEC) fully acknowledges 'that examiner error can happen in a system as large as the Leaving Cert, with 400,000 individual grades'. Mooney (2019) notes that 17% of Leaving Certificate assessment results were upgraded during the appeals process in 2019. This is a significant number of upgrades considering the high-stakes nature of the assessment.

In addition to errors within the state assessment process, choices made by stakeholders also impact on their experience of assessment. For example, Banks et al. (2018, p.54) found that, due to a focus on the CAO 'points race', parents felt that students did not always make the best subject (or level) choices, in some cases opting for what was perceived as an 'easier' subject, though it may have been one in which they had perhaps little interest or aptitude. The high-stakes nature of the Leaving Certificate has a far-reaching impact on those within the system, including parents, students and teachers, as discussed above. With regard to the wider literature on post-primary assessment, a lack of content on assessment other than that of the Leaving Certificate assessment is evident. For example, there is an absence of literature on local school assessments which take place at Christmas and in summer. In addition, a review of the literature yields little information on psychometric assessments. While O'Leary et al. (2019) write on the purpose of achievement/attainment assessments at primary level, there is no such literature available on post-primary level. However, in an open letter to students, a teacher identified the problematic nature of a standardised assessment score if viewed in isolation (O'Rourke, 2018, p.1):

> These tests do not assess all of what makes you special and unique. The people who create these tests and score them do not know each of you like I do and certainly not the way your families do.

This open letter is an opinion piece. However, academic discussion on this or any other point of view in relation to standardised testing in post-primary education is not evident in the wider literature.

An additional point of note is that in April 2016, there were 535,475 non-Irish nationals living in Ireland. This figure included 96,497 students and pupils, which accounted for

18% of all non-Irish nationals (CSO, 2016). This proportion of non-Irish nationals participating in the Irish education system and the system of post-primary assessment is significant. As regards assessment and the culture of assessment in the Irish context, students who are taught in a language that is not their home language may take up to seven or even 10 years to achieve parity in educational outcomes with their first-language peer group (GL Assessment, 2020, p.169). Indeed, a Teaching and Learning International Study (TALIS) noted that more than 50% of teachers do not feel well-prepared for the challenges of a multicultural learning environment (OECD, 2019, p.99). However, there is no indication in the literature of the impact of nationality on assessment, highlighting a further gap.

In summary, it is noted that the Leaving Certificate, as a high stakes assessment, is reflected upon and discussed in the wider literature. However, other post-primary assessments including psychometric assessments and other local assessments are not as widely discussed. This reflects the situation discussed in Chapter Two with regard to empirical research on the same topic.

3.3.3 Review of the wider literature: Stakeholder voice in the Irish system

Towards the end of the 20th century, arguments for the inclusion of student voice in education began to emerge in the wider literature, as discussed in Section 3.2.3. This section is concerned with research on the Irish context specifically relating to stakeholder voice, as outlined. This section builds on the empirical research on stakeholder voice outlined in Chapter Two. In addition, it should be noted that in reviewing the literature, it is important to note that a number of global and national policies have emerged in recent times on the topic of including stakeholder voice and on education. However, policy and legislation concerning stakeholder voice will be outlined in Chapter Four. In the context of Sections 3.2.1 and 3.3.1, above, where successful evaluation of education is concerned, dialogue between all stakeholders is required (Lodge, 2005; Baroutsis et al., 2015; Hanafin and Lynch, 2002: Brown et al., 2017).

Within the Irish post-primary system, the Irish Second Level Students Union (ISSU) advocates for student voice nationally. The ISSU lobbies for the inclusion of students' thoughts, experiences, feelings and knowledge in all aspects of student education in order to enrich the student experience (ISSU, 2010). Authors such as Conneely (2015) support

the approach of the ISSU and argue that students have opinions on education and want to be heard. Other authors, identify that student voice is generally absent within the Irish post-primary system (Fleming, 2011, 2013) and that students perceive themselves as voiceless and silenced (Smyth, 2018). Indeed, the ISSU also acknowledges that student voice is a 'challenging' concept to understand, let alone integrate into the education system (2010, p.4).

While the ISSU operates and advocates for student voice at national level, each school has a student council which operates to support students in each local school (DES, 2002; Fleming, 2013). This representation of student voice at national and local level could be perceived as democratic. However, Fleming (2013) identifies problems with this approach. For example, the process of surveying groups of students in order to include 'student voice' is problematic, as it results in the de-prioritisation of the qualitative participation of the voice (ibid). In addition, where student voice is included, the ISSU notes that a sample or group of students and parents will not necessarily adequately represent the majority of the community (ISSU, 2010). Hence, it is proposed that the inclusion of student voice is a challenge in education. Reflecting on Hart's ladder as outlined in Figure 1 of Section 3.2.3, it is proposed that the current level of inclusion of stakeholder voice in the Irish system is aligned with the non-participative levels of Hart's ladder. Indeed, the ISSU (2010) observes that the majority of decisions concerning local assessments are made by the 'teaching staff' (p.10). This mirrors the international approach whereby student voice is not generally considered in the logistics of assessment (Webber et al., 2014). With regard to parent voice in education, numerous parent bodies represent parents within post-primary education, including COMPASS (The National Association of Compass-Cooperation of Minority Religion and Protestant Parent Associations), PACCS (Parents Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools), ETBsNPA (Education and Training Boards Schools National Parent Associations) and CSPPA (Catholic Secondary Schools Parent Associations). Analysis of the websites of the various parent associations highlights an array of concerns, interests and voices of members. Resources are available on numerous topics, ranging from 'subject choice' (ETBsNPA, 2019) to 'Leaving Cert appeals' (COMPASS, 2020) and to 'Jesus Christ: Fact or Fiction' (FSCCPA, 2020). The National Parents Council Post-primary (NPCPP) advocates on behalf of all parents of students in post-primary education in Ireland (NPCPP, 2020). The NPCPP is a limited company, and it has same rights to consultation in education as the management and teachers' unions (NPCPP, 2020). The

vision and mission for the NPCPP involves the provision of a structure through which parents can inform and influence policy development. Indeed, the philosophy and vision behind 'parent voice' in education are well-represented, if a little fragmented. However, a closer review of the literature reveals that, despite the clear vision and policy of the NPCPP as outlined, as of February 2020, the most up-to-date newsletter available from the NPCPP was from February 2017 (NPCPP, 2020). Indeed, further inspection of the websites reveals that the participation of parents within all parent-voice organisations may be a consistent and significant issue. For example, the Parents Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools (PACCS), a membership body of the NCPP, noted in its executive meeting of May 2018 that levels of participation on the part of parents were lower than desired (PACCS, 2018). Similarly, in the PACCS executive meeting of January 2019, it was agreed to encourage more members to join PACCS, with each member committing to encourage at least one person from his/her region to join (PACCS, 2019). This difficulty around parent participation is recognised by other authors in the wider literature, as discussed in Section 2.3.3. Hence, as parent engagement 'encapsulates both parent voice and parent presence', in the view of McKenna and Millen (2013, p.9), the difficulty surrounding parent engagement is problematic in relation to the Irish system of post-primary education. This difficulty surrounding parental engagement may be related to what Banks et al. (2018) identify as a lack of awareness of parents in general where the operation of the post-primary system at large is concerned. Irrespective of the origins of the difficulty, it is reported that parents do not feel that their voice is heard in education (NPCPP, 2020). This is consistent with the sentiment expressed by students.

Regarding stakeholder voice in general, it is clear that there are issues and challenges concerning participation. Gorard (2010) suggests that parents want, above all, happiness and security for their children. The Irish Second Level Students' Union (ISSU) agrees with this concept and notes that it is a natural 'human condition' for parents to want the best for their own children (2010, p.10). Given this predisposition for the pursuit of happiness, it is interesting that the activity and participation of stakeholders in post-primary education is a challenge. Irrespective of the reasons for lack of inclusion of stakeholder voice, the conditions required for successful self-evaluation at school level include dialogue between all stakeholders, and it is widely recognised in the wider literature that stakeholder voice should be included in discussion and decision-making (Lodge, 2005; Baroutsis et al., 2015; Hanafin and Lynch, 2002; Brown et al., 2017).

Indeed, in relation to the perceived fear of the disintegration of traditional authority within the post-primary education system, it is noted that the ISSU (2010, p.4) asserts that, in order for 'hope' to blossom in our education system, all stakeholders must 'set their fears aside and take a chance'.

3.3.4 Irish context of education, assessment, and stakeholder voice: Conclusion

This section provided an overall review of the wider literature relating to education, assessment and stakeholder voice in the Irish post-primary system. Ireland, operating within a global landscape, has experienced a requirement for an educated workforce similar to that of other countries around the globe, due to the processes of globalisation. This requirement has led to the development of a system of education in the 21st century wherein accountability and evaluation of education systems are significant. In the Irish system, an emphasis on post-primary Leaving Certificate and CAO points as a measure of quality for an individual school and an individual student has emerged in the literature. Indeed, similar to contemporary empirical research, as outlined in Chapter Two, the broader literature on the Leaving Certificate is bountiful. The quality of the assessment, the extent of fairness or bias within the system and the impact on the wellbeing of stakeholders within the system are widely discussed. However, an absence of content on other assessments within post-primary education is evident in the broader literature. Regarding stakeholder voice in education, a review of the wider literature indicates that, while there are organisations representing these stakeholders in Ireland, the participation, power, and influence of these organisations is not widely perceived, particularly by those stakeholders whom these organisations represent. This research seeks to address the deficiency of stakeholder voice in the Irish education system with regard to post-primary assessment.

3.4 Key theoretical perspectives

This section introduces and outlines the theoretical perspective adopted as a lens for this research in the context of a review of the wider literature. In order to introduce the topic, a number of key theoretical perspectives on education and assessment as identified in the literature review are initially noted before theoretical perspectives on the inclusion of

stakeholder voice are outlined. Finally, a rationale for adopting functionalism as the lens through which this research is conducted is provided.

3.4.1 Key theoretical perspectives on education and assessment

A review of the wider literature on education and assessment indicated that authors adopted multiple theoretical perspectives when writing about the topic. Most noticeable within the literature, particularly concerning evaluation and accountability is the 'economistic human capital framework' perspective which provides a lens through which education is frequently understood (Lingard and Grek, 2007, p.1). The OECD adopts this economistic human capital framework. However, authors writing on the OECD's PISA programme adopted a summative comparative approach in their work on assessment data (Martens et al., 2004; Henry et al., 2001). Indeed, the importance and relevance of a summative and accountable system of education, through assessment data, due to 21st-century globalisation has been clearly outlined and is a lens through which the Irish context has been outlined thus far in this chapter with regard to the contemporary literature review. However, where Chapter Two and previous empirical research on the area of education and assessment are concerned, it is important to reflect on the theoretical perspectives adopted by contemporary researchers. As noted in Chapter Two, regarding previous research on education, a systems evaluation perspective is adopted by many researchers (Nusche, 2012; Bergseng et al., 2019; Grek, 2009) which mirrors that of the economistic human capital framework perspective noted above. Where the Irish system of education and assessment is concerned, much of the previous empirical research on education and assessment generally does not specifically note the perspective from which it has been conducted. For example, it is only in the conclusion to their paper that Banks and Smyth (2015a, p.15) note that their article attempts to 'bridge the gap' between a psychological and sociological perspective. In addition, Darmody (2017) discusses the socio-cultural lens through which the tapestry of education and assessment is understood in the literature. However, apart from adopting pragmatism, Darmody (2017) does not disclose the theoretical framework from which her research is conducted. Similarly, Byrne and Smyth (2010) disclose neither the lens nor the theoretical framework through which their research has been conducted. This was problematic in terms of initially identifying a theoretical lens through which to conduct this research. However, prior to identifying the best approach, key theoretical perspectives on stakeholder voice must also be considered.

3.4.2 Key theoretical perspectives on stakeholder voice

A number of different theoretical perspectives have been adopted by international authors in order to research and write about stakeholder perspectives. As noted in Chapter Two, where research on stakeholder voice has been conducted, it is mainly the perspectives of teachers which have been explored to date. Key theoretical perspectives on teacher voice may be classified with regard to an evolving theoretical framework. For example, teacher beliefs were initially understood through an epistemological lens (Price, 1973) before they evolved and became perceived through a cognitive constructivist approach (Pintrich, 1990; Snow et al., 1996). Towards the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, however, the perspectives of stakeholders (teachers) became understood through more of a conceptual lens (Dole and Sinatra, 1998; Mason and Murphy, 2006). Despite the evolving theoretical framework, as outlined, Ashton (2015) provides a strong argument for integrating as many elements as possible into the chosen theoretical approach where stakeholder voice is concerned, as all factors, including cognitive and emotional elements, will provide 'a more realistic understanding of the complex realities' of people's perceptions (Ashton, 2015, p.242). Indeed, as Ashton (2015) notes, conducting research from a multitude of different perspectives enhances and builds on knowledge.

With regard to the Irish system and key theoretical perspectives utilised to explore stakeholder voice, Fleming (2013) conducted his research from a transformative perspective, whereby the empirical data collected in his research was considered with regard to social justice and social inequality. Conneely (2015) did not explicitly state the theoretical framework involved in her approach; however, from her work at large, it is evident that she explores student voice from a rights-based approach to inspections. Hence, it is concluded that, similar to the theoretical approach undertaken with regard to education and assessment, the theoretical approaches and frameworks utilised in the literature for addressing stakeholder voice are varied, and a consistent lens is not applied. Hence, the researcher had much to consider with regard to the theoretical framework adopted for this research.

3.4.3 Theoretical framework for this research

In her reading of the broader literature on assessment, the researcher observed a general theme or theoretical framework which could be applied to assessment and stakeholder voice within systems of education. The researcher majored in sociology for her undergraduate degree, and she conducted her master's thesis on the topic of the sociology of education. In reading the wider literature on the topics of assessment and stakeholder voice for this research, the researcher identified an overarching functionalist framework. Functionalism is a particular sociological perspective through which society may be understood and was first defined by Emile Durkheim, a founding father of sociology (1953; 1977). Regarding the functionalist perspective as a framework for understanding society, Durkheim theorised that society has evolved and will always continue to evolve in a way that maintains equilibrium, functionality and a general status quo (ibid). A functionalist perspective towards education identifies that the purpose of education systems (and within them, systems of assessment) is to provide a mechanism through which social order is maintained (Parsons, 1937; Raffo et al., 2010; Wilson, 2011). A review of the literature highlighted that contemporary systems of assessment fulfil this function (Hyland, 2011). Similarly, Wilson (2011, p.2) explains the role or purpose of a school from a functionalist perspective as an institution which supports social order and minimises the eruption of 'chaos'. Indeed, as explored in this chapter, it is evident from the wider literature that there is an international and national drive for education to meet societal needs in an ordered way. Systems of education are responding to the needs of industry and are providing structured, defined and quality-assured training for a global workforce (outlined in relation to the international scene and in relation to Ireland). Assessment within education is a mechanism through which individuals may compete to access various opportunities, including significant prospects offered within society, upon which their 'life depends' (Banks and Smyth, 2015a). In this way, education and assessment perform a functionalist role which nurtures a widely accepted equilibrium aligned with that described by Durkheim (1953, 1977).

However, the concept of 'stakeholder voice' in relation to a functionalist theoretical framework is highly interesting and is an area which would benefit from research and reflection. While the functionalist perspective maintains that societal systems will always maintain the status quo (Parsons, 1937; Raffo et al., 2010), the contemporary inclusion of stakeholder voice in the well-established traditional systems of education and assessment may be a turbulent or disruptive element. This research is conducted through a

functionalist lens in order to gain an understanding of how stakeholders perceive and evaluate post-primary assessment. The functionalist perspective offers a lens through which societal structures are understood. This research seeks to understand stakeholder perspectives. Indeed, the researcher's views are aligned with those of Wilson (2011, p.2), who argues that in order 'to gain a better understanding of the social institution called school, we need to comprehend the function or social needs it serves in our social system' (Wilson, 2011, p.2). This leads to the issue of how to effectively apply a functionalist lens to empirical research. Indeed, this question has been posed by Turner and Maryanski (1979) within the literature, as they ask, 'how can we use functionalism as a tool for getting a handle on the empirical world and for ordering and displaying data?' (p.134). Two distinct approaches to the application of a functionalist theoretical framework to research are described by Turner and Maryanski (1979): (i) the comparative method and (ii) holistic requisite analysis. The comparative method involves presenting data from diverse social systems for the purpose of comparison. However, this research, which focuses on a single case study analysis, is undertaken with regard to holistic requisite analysis, which aims to describe social situations (ibid). Indeed, as will be outlined in Chapter Five, this research focuses on a descriptive analysis of a single case study analysis. A holistic requisite analysis approach is deemed to be suitable for research when a researcher wishes to describe an entire social system, as is the focus of this research on a case study analysis of assessment (Parsons, 1937; Turner and Maryanski, 1979)

3.5 Chapter conclusion

This chapter builds on the contemporary empirical research on education, assessment and stakeholder voice, as outlined in Chapter Two, by providing an overview and critical analysis of contemporary literature on the same topics. A complex economic relationship exists between nation states in the present globalised world. As a result of this complex relationship, countries have united and legislated for agreements in a variety of ways (e.g. the creation of the EU and the OECD). These unions and agreements foster international economic policy and development, which in turn impacts systems of education. In order to compare and contrast international systems of education, assessment is utilised, and a variety of systems (e.g. PISA and VAM) have been defined to relativise summative international standards. This international approach to education and assessment has had an impact on the contemporary Irish landscape. Like other nation states, Ireland is keen

to operate and maintain a high-quality and accountable education system, and assessment data is utilised for this purpose. However, the use of summative assessment data within the Irish education system has led to intense pressure as regards the Leaving Certificate assessment, in particular.

Regarding stakeholder voice, a review of the wider international literature indicates a general movement towards including stakeholder inputs in debates and decision-making in education and assessment. However, challenges and barriers towards this inclusion (such as difficulty defining stakeholder voice and the continuum of participation) have been identified internationally. Concerning the Irish landscape, it is identified that agencies representing student (ISSU) and parent (NPCPP) voice have been established. However, the participation of these organisations and the effectiveness and impact of these organisations is questioned within the wider literature. Hence, a clear rationale for the inclusion of research on the area and the impact of stakeholder voice in the Irish post-primary system of education is evident: the infrastructure for inclusion is in place; however, the wider literature suggests an absence of power where stakeholder voice is concerned. Research is required in order to fully comprehend why barriers and challenges exist.

As discussed in the final section of this chapter, a number of key theoretical perspectives relating to assessment and stakeholder voice have been utilised in the wider literature. Given the literature at large, and the education and experience of the researcher, a functionalist approach was adopted for this research in order to gain a deeper understanding of how the needs of society (21st-century Ireland and the post-primary school system) integrate with and impact upon the needs of the individual (student and parent voice).

This chapter has provided an overview of the wider literature, which, when considered in line with contemporary empirical research (as outlined in Chapter Two) contributes to the development of policy. Chapter Four presents an overview of contemporary assessment and stakeholder voice policy to provide the final contextual background to this research.

Chapter Four: Policy context

4.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on Chapter Two (empirical research) and Chapter Three (literature review) to provide the final contextual element regarding education, assessment and stakeholder voice. This chapter provides an overview of the policy context of these areas. As noted at the end of Chapter Three, policy generally evolves through the availability of knowledge as a result of research and debate. In order to undertake an analysis and evaluation of assessment in the Irish post-primary education system, it is critical to understand legislation and policy in the area, as outlined in this chapter. An introduction to international policy development in educational assessment and stakeholder voice is initially presented in Section 4.2. Policy developments in relation to the Irish post-primary system are subsequently outlined in Section 4.3. In addition, the system of post-primary education, upon which this research is focused, is summarised in relation to national policy. In particular, the context of continuity and reform is addressed as the post-primary system evolves at the Junior Cycle level but continues as established in the case of the Senior Cycle.

4.2 International policy developments

As introduced in Chapter One and discussed in Chapter Three, 21st-century international economic development has resulted in nations requiring an educated and skilled workforce. This has resulted in an evolution away from the memorisation of knowledge, or 'knowledge of what', towards 'knowledge of how' (Winter, 2012). The changing economic needs of nation states have implications for education, as discussed. This section introduces contemporary international policy which has emerged and evolved in order to address the changing needs of nation states in relation to the economy, and systems of education in particular. International policy concerning quality assurance within education is initially outlined before international assessment policy is introduced. Finally, the international policy context on stakeholder voice is outlined. These international policy developments set the scene and provide a foundation and context for the evolution of Irish policy developments which are explored in Section 4.3.

4.2.1 International policy on 'quality assurance' in education

As discussed in Section 3.2, individual nation states are concerned with maintaining and improving quality within their education systems. Certain international policy agreements have been developed and ratified to reflect this need on behalf of individual governments. For example, Article 165 of the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union (EU, 2007) legislates for the development of quality systems of education for nation states. Similarly, the Lisbon Treaty was signed by all members of the European Union, who agreed to prioritise the development of education in order to directly improve European standards within the competitive global landscape (EU, 2007). In addition, as noted in Chapters One and Two, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) evolved with the purpose of actively enhancing international systems of education in order to advance the competencies, skills and abilities of the international workforce as required by industry (OECD, 2018). The OECD has had a major impact on education in a variety of ways. For example, as discussed in Chapter Two, the OECD conducts extensive research on systems of education worldwide. In addition, it manages a variety of programmes and projects, such as the DeSeCo Project, developed in 1997. The OECD recognises that each nation faces particular challenges in the global economy and that, in order to promote economic advancement, the continued evolution of appropriate systems of education is required (OECD, 2005, 2014, 2018). Based on empirical research (discussed in Chapter Two) and on discussion of the wider literature (discussed in Chapter Three), the OECD informs policy and planning. For example, at the beginning of the 21st century, the DeSeCo Project outlined a conceptual framework to inform the development and definition of key competencies for citizens of member nations (OECD, 2005). Similarly, the 'Future of Education and Skills 2030' plan is a contemporary vision for the evolution of education outlined by the OECD (2018b). This vision for education, based on global economic need, is illustrated through a 'compass' image, displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2: OECD Compass

(Source: http://www.oecd.org/education/2030-project, OECD 2018b)

The compass displayed in Figure 2 depicts the contemporary OECD vision for education. The development of competencies at the level of the individual is depicted at the core of the compass. Knowledge, attitudes, sills and values are also included as key elements of learning. This documents a clear philosophical approach on the part of the OECD involving a change away from the traditional prescriptive approach towards reflection and applied transformation (OECD, 2018, p.4). Indeed, the compass illustration itself includes reference to 'creating new value.' In addition to the OECD vision for education, other initiatives and visions are also at play. For example, 'The Europe 2020 Strategy' is another example of contemporary reform. This strategy outlines seven specific targets for education in Europe, defined with the purpose of ensuring the EU remains competitive and dynamic in comparison to its global counterparts (OECD, 2014; Roth and Thum, 2010). Hence, as the examples of the OECD Compass (2018) and the Europe 2020 strategy (OECD, 2014) demonstrate, agreements at an international level, and a European level, shape the vision, philosophy and aims of education systems worldwide. Through a shared vision and shared aims, international standards develop. However, how can international systems measure the effectiveness of education systems and maintain

assurance of quality on a nation-by-nation basis, notwithstanding the shared vision and aims of education systems? Systems of education are evaluated on an international and a national basis. International comparisons are possible due to statistical analysis of assessment data. In addition, on a national level, dual systems of evaluation are evident within many nation states in Europe, as they are recognised as having the potential to be more effective, since the flaws inherent in a single system of evaluation may be counteracted (McNamara et al., 2004). Irrespective of the method of evaluation, assessment data has a role to play.

4.2.2 International policy developments (assessment)

In order to maintain quality within education, summative assessment data is utilised on a local, national and international basis. This section is concerned with international use of assessment data and policy. Section 4.3 will outline the Irish national and local policy approach concerning assessment data. As discussed in Chapter Two with regard to international empirical research on assessment, and in relation to the development of education as outlined in Section 4.2.1, above, the OECD has become synonymous with evolving European and national policy for education (Lingard and Grek, 2007). With regard to the DeSeCo Project referred to in the previous section, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) developed and became what was described by Grek (2009, p.1) as 'a major and influential component of the OECD's educational work'. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assesses the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds from different OECD countries, for the purpose of international comparison (Grek, 2009). For example, in 2015, over half a million 15-year-old students (a sample representing a population of 28 million) from 72 countries sat the PISA assessment in science, mathematics, reading, collaborative problem-solving and financial literacy, generating significant statistical data on an international scale (OECD, 2018; 2018b). It is through statistics and reports such as those relating to PISA that the OECD has become powerful in relation to policy recommendations (Porter and Webb, 2004). Indeed, Grek (2009, p.5) asserts that it is clear that this use of assessment data has 'global significance'. Statistical and internationally comparative information on standards of education as generated by the OECD is respected internationally and is utilised by individual nation states in a variety of ways. For example, Ireland's national strategy to improve literacy and numeracy stemmed from the nation's PISA 2009 results (DES,

2011). Prior to outlining the Irish landscape, however, international policy developments with regard to stakeholder voice must be discussed.

4.2.3 International policy developments (stakeholder voice)

As outlined in Chapter Two, this research is concerned with the perspectives of parents and students as primary stakeholders in education. Regarding student voice in particular, the end of the 20th century marked a significant empowerment of children at international policy level when the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989. All members of the UN (with the exception of the USA and Somalia) ratified it (UN, 2010). Within this document, Article 12 relates to children having the right to express their views freely and to these views being given due weight (ibid). The rights of the child are legally outlined in the UNCRC's Article 12 as follows:

- Children have the right to express their views freely; 'the child who is capable of forming his or her own views' has a right to do so in any matter that affects the child.

- Children must be presented with an opportunity to express their views
(UNCRC, 1992).

Article 12 documented the rights of children to be empowered in an international landscape, and towards the end of the 20th century, arguments for the inclusion of student voice in education began to emerge in the wider literature, as discussed in Chapter Three. However, this rights-based approach to stakeholder voice and the newly associated power that accompanies it can be viewed as a challenge by some in a system of education which has been long-established (Cook-Sather, 2006). This challenge was referred to with regard to functionalism, as outlined in Chapter Three. For example, it is noteworthy that the United States government did not ratify the UNCRC, it is speculated, due to concerns about the perceived erosion of the authority of adults, which would therefore potentially create a change in the status quo (Kilbourne, 1998). However, the resistance to the inclusion of student voice in education is not limited to the United States. A defensive approach among teachers to the inclusion of student and parent voice has been reported worldwide (Cook-Sather, 2006; Smyth, 2006a; Fielding, 2004). Previous research on the Israeli system conducted by Addi-Raccah and Ainhoren (2009), for example, indicates that teachers' least favoured school context is one in which parents are empowered. In

response to this, student representative groups such as the ISSU (ISSU, 2010, p.4) assert that, in order for 'hope' to blossom in education systems, those who are resistant must 'set their fears aside and take a chance'. Fears and apprehensions aside, for countries that ratified the UNCRC, there is a responsibility for governments to accommodate the inclusion of student voice into their systems of education. The Irish government is no exception, as will be discussed in Section 4.3.3.

A rights-based approach to the inclusion of parent voice in education is not as clearly legislated for internationally compared to that of student voice. However, the stance of the OECD is that parents would ideally be actively involved in their child's education from birth (OECD, 2012). Indeed, it is from parents' 'genuine interest and active engagement' that a child benefits and will lead to a longer engagement with formal education, which is desirable (OECD, 2012, p.12). Statistical reports from PISA indicate that higher PISA scores are associated with academic resilience directly relating to support from parents (Schleicher, 2018). Irrespective of the OECD stance, international policy differs in relation to the inclusion of parents in education. Sweden, for example, gives high priority to parental inclusion, as their participation in the development of their children is a cornerstone of national policy. However, regional differences within Sweden in terms of the enactment of this policy are evident (Gunnarsson et al., 1999). In the Netherlands, however, a broader approach has been adopted, and the importance of the parent extends to the 'community', which is perceived as a major influence where the overall support and education of students is concerned (OECD, 2000). Hence, it is concluded that, while there is an absence of a blanket approach to parent inclusion in education, and while international policy in relation to parent participation varies, the participation of parents is generally recognised as contributing to enhanced education and opportunities for students.

4.2.4 Conclusion on international policy developments

In order for a case study analysis in Irish post-primary assessment to take place, the Irish policy context must be outlined. However, the Irish policy context does not exist within a vacuum. This section outlined the general international approach towards education and stakeholder voice policy in order to contextualise Irish educational policy. As such, international nations are concerned with providing quality education systems for all citizens. A number of international agreements and treaties have been agreed to by

individual nation states as regards guidance for the evolution of education. In unifying the approach and in learning from each other, nation states can enhance quality in their individual systems. In addition, in order to gain a comparative understanding of the effectiveness of education systems, assessment data is accepted as an appropriate method for measuring quality of learning. In relation to stakeholder voice, ratification of the UNCRC was a significant development as regards student voice, and with it, a rights-based approach to the inclusion of student voice in education began to evolve. While no such international agreement exists in relation to parent voice in education, a general consensus in relation to the participation of parents in their child's education is identified internationally. In summary, it is clear that international policy and agreements in relation to education, assessment and use of assessment data exist in 21st-century education. In addition, and despite the barriers to including stakeholder voice as outlined in Chapter Three, a general international consensus on the active participation of stakeholder voice is also evident in evolving 21st-century policy.

4.3 Irish policy developments

This section explores contemporary developments in relation to Irish policy in the areas of education, assessment and stakeholder voice. An in-depth overview of the Irish system, within which this research is conducted, is explored. Ireland is a member of the European Union and the OECD. As a result, the Irish approach to policy development is influenced by all of the elements explored in Section 4.2, above. This section outlines the policy approach to quality assurance within the Irish post-primary education system. Policy developments with regard to assessment are subsequently outlined. Finally, Irish policy developments with regard to stakeholder voice are noted in order to provide relevant contextual information where an analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education through the evaluation of stakeholder perspectives is concerned.

4.3.1 Irish education quality assurance

As outlined in Section 4.2.1., the Irish system of post-primary education is subject to evaluation on an international playing field (Ireland is a member of the OECD). Indeed, Ireland has an excellent record of participation in all cycles of PISA since its inception in 2000 (ERC, 2020). In addition to this participation in the international landscape, national assessment and quality assurance practices within the Irish post-primary system are also

employed at national level to regulate quality within the system. However, these quality assurance measures within the Irish post-primary system are relatively new. Indeed, up to the early 1990s, formal evaluation within the Irish education system was deemed to have been 'irrelevant' (McNamara et al., 2004, p.60). This changed towards the beginning of the 21st century with the introduction of the Education Act (GOI, 1998), when formal evaluation of schools became defined, relevant and well-established. Evaluation of the contemporary Irish post-primary system is conducted through a dual system of school self-evaluation and inspections (Brown et al., 2016, 2018; DES, 2012b). Through a dual approach, schools can employ what Brown et al. (2016, p.10) describe as 'intelligent accountability'. When considering Ireland's engagement with PISA (starting in 2000) and the development and ratification of the Education Act (1998), it is concluded that quality assurance within the Irish post-primary education system formally came into being at the turn of the 21st century. This is significant timing, and it demonstrates how national policy with regard to evaluation was timely given the context of globalisation, as described in Chapter One.

Ireland operates a system of dual-evaluation within local schools on a national level, as noted. A system of external inspection complements a school self-evaluation (SSE) process. In relation to the balance of the dual process of evaluation, an entire section of the Education Act (Section 13) is dedicated to outlining the role and responsibilities of the Inspectorate. However, the ultimate goal of the Inspectorate is for schools to conduct their own school self-evaluations transparently and accurately, and for inspectors to visit schools in order to evaluate the school's own self-evaluation (Hislop, 2012). Information gathering and data analysis are noted as vital within SSE policy guidelines (DES, 2016a, 2016d). Each stage of post-primary assessment involves a particular combination of policy concerning curriculum and assessment. Data is used to evaluate education in Ireland (DES, 2011). In 2011, schools were notified of the requirement of teachers, principals and boards of management to use assessment information, including information about literacy and numeracy, to inform their school self-evaluation, reflective practices and the school improvement plan (DES, 2011). On a local level, in each post-primary school, assessment data is also utilised for the purpose of evaluation, as demonstrated in a number of individual school Inspectorate reports (DES, 2015e, 2016e, 2016g, 2017d). For example, in a school management response to a DES inspection report, school management concluded that the relevant school 'is a data rich environment' (DES, 2015e, p.10). In addition, school management added, 'we welcome the

recommendation that more systematic use of available data is made by management and teachers going forward in order to enhance teaching and learning in our school' (DES, 2015e, p.10). It is clear that assessment data is valued by policymakers and school management for evaluation within the wider education system, and within schools. In Ireland, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) acknowledges the value of assessment data in many ways. For example, consideration of the percentage of students performing above or below a certain defined standard in national examinations is relevant (DES, 2016c, 2016e, 2017a). The DES (2016) also recommends the analysis of assessment data in order to identify certain priorities within the system of education, such as specific needs for staff development, areas for prioritisation and the acquisition and implementation of certain resources within the school. Indeed, the DES recommends that management and teachers should make greater use of this high-quality data to inform decisions (DES, 2015e, p.6). In addition, the DES recommends the use of assessment data in order to measure the effectiveness of educational initiatives (DES, 2011, p.9). In Ireland, the department defines 'effective schools' as schools which regularly analyse data from standardised tests and other sources, and which track trends over time, using the data from assessment to identify priorities for their development, including changes they may wish to make (DES, 2011, p.9). In summary, assessment data is being used increasingly within Irish schools (DES, 2016d, 2017a), and is promoted by the Inspectorate (DES, 2016e, 2018d). As regards evaluation of the Irish system, data is noted as being important to the development of national policy:

> - Data is vital to inform national education policy and to identify ways of improving the performance of the education system. (Department of Education and Skills, 2011)

In addition, data is noted as important for the development of local school policy:

> - Analysis of data provides an informed means of improving the general performance of a school system; at school level, principals, teachers and boards of management can use empirical data to identify how well they are providing for the needs of individual students and groups. (ibid)
> - It informs school self-evaluation and drives reflective practices and the school improvement plans. (ibid, p.9)
> - It supports target-setting for students throughout post-primary education. (DES, 2017d; DES, 2016e)

Hence, it is clear that assessment data is highly important for quality assurance within the Irish post-primary education system at a national and a local level. Assessment data is

gathered on a national and local level, as will be outlined in Section 4.3.2. In addition to the use of assessment data, school self-evaluation (SSE) is defined as 'a collaborative, reflective process of internal school review' (DES, 2020d). This reflects the intent of inclusion of stakeholder voice, which will be addressed in greater detail in Section 4.3.3.

Regarding the structure of post-primary education, the Irish system is comprised of two defined stages of cycles:

- Junior Cycle (First, Second and Third Years)
- Senior Cycle (Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Years)

4.3.2 Irish policy developments (assessment)

As outlined in Section 4.3.1, the Irish system of post-primary education consists of Junior Cycle and Senior Cycle programmes. This section outlines the Irish assessment policy developments in relation to each cycle, in order to contextualise this research in three distinct sections: (i) Entrance Assessment (prior to joining post-primary education), (ii) Junior Cycle Assessment and (iii) Senior Cycle Assessment. Prior to investigating the three distinct sections as outlined, The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) must be introduced. The NCCA is a statutory body of the Department of Education and Skills. As the title suggests, the NCCA is responsible for matters relating to curriculum and assessment within the education system in Ireland, including but not limited to the post-primary system of education. The NCCA advises the Minister for Education and Skills on:

i) curriculum and assessment for early childhood education, primary schools, and post-primary schools.

ii) assessment procedures used in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum (NCCA, 2020a).

Hence, the NCCA plays a significant role in education and is heavily involved in the development of curriculum and assessment at Junior and Senior Cycle levels, as will be outlined. However, it should be noted that the NCCA is not currently involved in the entrance assessment processes which take place at a local level in post-primary schools annually (these are detailed below).

Entrance assessment

Prior to students joining post-primary education, it is an established tradition that they undertake an 'entrance assessment'. Each school admission policy will differ, and there is no centralised system in Ireland for operating standard entrance assessments. However, test publishers GL Assessment (2020b) claims that the Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT4) is taken by two thirds of post-primary schools in Ireland each year. Indeed, the case study school, which will be introduced in Chapter Five, utilises the CAT4 assessment as its chosen entrance assessment for the purpose of assessing the incoming First-Year cohort. Where the CAT4 is implemented, assessments of incoming students are based primarily on psychometric assessments related to cognitive ability, rather than assessments in more familiar primary school curriculum subjects, such as English and mathematics. The intention of offering a standardised non-curriculum-based assessment is to provide all new students with a 'fresh start' to learning at second level (DES, 2016g, p.4). In addition, The Education Act 1998 asserts that a school should develop 'mechanisms whereby students who have problems achieving their potential may be identified as early as practicable and assisted' (GOI, 1998, p.35). To an extent, the CAT4 assessment answers this requirement stated in the Education Act (1998), as, according to the publishers, the CAT4 involves a suite of reasoning tests which have been developed 'to support schools in understanding students' abilities and likely academic potential' (GL Assessment, 2020, p.7). Indeed, in its introduction to the CAT4, the company providing the assessment notes that assessment data can be used for the purpose of 'target setting and monitoring the performance of groups of students' (ibid). In addition, this assessment may be used to identify potential underachievers and where pupils appear to be attaining at a level that is higher than their potential suggests (GL Assessment, 2020, p.120). As such, results from CAT4 can assist schools 'in intervention, monitoring progress and setting targets for future attainment […] the information the test yields can become a reference point against which progress and performance can be measured' (GL Assessment, 2020, p.104). This is particularly interesting where assessment policy is concerned. While use of the CAT4 is in line with the Education Act, the CAT4 is an ability-and-aptitude assessment which is legislated for by the Department of Education and Skills in Circular 0058/2019 (DES, 2019g); this governs the official policy approach. The Department of Education and Skills recognises that there are two general categories of instruments for the purpose of psychometric assessment in post-primary education (DES, 2017c). Curriculum-independent standardised ability assessments measure enduring and long-term traits rather than the attainment of learning; 'they measure what a student is capable of knowing

rather than what is known' (DES, 2017c, p.2). The CAT4 is an example of a curriculum-independent standardised ability assessment.

The introduction of mandatory standardised testing at post-primary level, under the Interim Review of the National Strategy on Literacy and Numeracy (2011-2020), has been deferred (DES, 2017a). However, schools are advised that they may implement standardised testing at their own discretion. The use of the data, however, is not discretionary, and is governed by incremental department circulars on the topic. Circular 0058/2019 is the most recent circular available. It revised circular 0035/2017, which, in turn, revised circular 0034/2015, indicating that department policy on psychometric assessments is regularly revised and updated.

The Department of Education and Skills, through the Inspectorate, is encouraging the use of entrance assessment results as baseline evidence for goal setting and the production of attainment targets for individual students. In this way, a trajectory for students is forecasted as they navigate through post-primary education and assessment (DES, 2015d, 2016e, 2018d, 2018e, 2018f). The utilisation of psychometric tests (including the CAT4) as recommended by the Inspectorate (DES, 2015e, 2016e, 2016g, 2017d) as an evidence base is somewhat in conflict with DES Circular 0058/2019 (DES, 2019g). This circular (ibid) addresses and guides the use of psychometric tests by trained personnel within the school context (SEN and guidance counsellors). Through Circular 0058/2019, the DES (2019g, p.1) recognises that 'appropriate use' of assessment instruments/tests includes the following:

a) guiding and supporting students' decision-making regarding subject choice and Senior Cycle options.

b) supporting students' career development, including planning for higher education, further education and training, apprenticeships, or work.

c) providing a more detailed view of a student's learning strengths and needs (DES, 2019g, p.2).

Circular 0058/2019 (DES, 2019g) does not refer to the use of psychometric assessment data as appropriate for use as baseline data nor for goal setting. In addition, the use of psychometric assessment data as baseline data (DES, 2019e; DES, 2019a) may potentially be in conflict with the Irish National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) approach, which notes that 'schools need to be aware of the risks associated with

early labelling, which may place a ceiling on expectations or consign students to particular groups' (NEPS, 2010, p.40). Hence, a conflict arises when the Inspectorate (2016e) is recommending and commending the use of this assessment data for this purpose. In addition, Circular 0058/2019 is in conflict with Circular 0056/2011, wherein the Department of Education actively encourages schools to engage with longitudinal analysis of data from standardised tests to promote school effectiveness (DES, 2011). Indeed, the importance of tracking all students, including those who are considered 'more able' and those who are considered 'vulnerable', within the system is also recognised as policy (DES, 2011, p.9). Hence, it is proposed that assessment data is highly valued by the DES for evaluation and longitudinal use; however, not all department policy is aligned in relation to assessment. Indeed, a lack of cohesion, alignment and communication amongst department policy documents and Inspectorate reports is evident. No clear set of national guidelines on the use of assessment data is provided in the Irish context. Circular 0058/2019, in relation to psychometric assessment, notes that the DES acknowledges the existence of 'confusion' within assessment practices (2019g, pp.1-2). This is highly problematic given the utilisation of the data for evaluation and accountability within the post-primary education system, as discussed in the previous section. Interestingly, this is not the case at primary level. Schools in the Irish primary education sector are obliged to facilitate formal engagement with standardised testing at defined intervals (DES, 2018b). In addition, the data received from the standardised testing must be clearly reported (in writing and online) to parents, the Department of Education and the board of management in schools, in line with Circular 0056/2011 (DES, 2011). In addition to this distribution of assessment data to key stakeholders during primary education, the quantitative data must be included on student passports to assist in the case of a change of schools and/or when a student graduates to post-primary level. Hence, it is clear that standardised testing is heavily regulated and well-established within the Irish primary school sector. This research is conducted in order to inform the development of clearer policy at post-primary level by providing an account of stakeholder views on the issue.

Junior Cycle

Junior Cycle education is the description given to the first three years of post-primary education. Junior Cycle assessments incrementally replaced Junior Certificate assessment, beginning in September 2014. This section outlines the evolution of policy

from Junior Certificate to Junior Cycle assessment, demonstrating contemporary reform within the Irish post-primary system.

The Junior Certificate assessment was introduced in 1989 as an assessment that would take place at the end of the third year of post-primary education. The Junior Certificate assessment primarily involved a written exam conducted under state examination regulations in all subjects, with one exception: art, craft and design (DES, 2020b). Subjects could be undertaken at higher level or ordinary level, while one subject, Civic Social and Political Education (CSPE), was undertaken by all students at common level. Practical assessments were facilitated in some higher-level subjects, such as art, music, home economics and metalwork. In addition, practical coursework was included for assessment in nine of the 25 Junior Certificate subjects offered (DES, 2020b). Hence, a blended approach to assessment was somewhat evident. Students were subsequently awarded a grade of A/B/C/D/E/F/NG at each level, in line with their performance within the assessment. As noted, CSPE is the only Junior Certificate subject offered at common level, and it was a late addition to the Junior Certificate curriculum, which was mandatory from 1996. CSPE was somewhat different to the other Junior Certificate subjects, wherein the majority of marks were provided for the written assessment. CSPE focused on developing an understanding amongst students of community, society, the wider world and the concept of active citizenship (NCCA, 2020c). Assessment in Junior Certificate CSPE involved a written test accounting for 40% of a student's grade, and the majority of marks (60%) were accredited to a written report on an action project or the presentation of a coursework of assessment booklet (NCCA, 2020c). As such, this approach to assessment is unique in the context of the Junior Certificate. However, it served as a precursor to what would be introduced in the revised Junior Cycle.

From September 2014, the Junior Certificate began to be phased out of post-primary education, replaced by a more contemporary vision for post-primary in line with skills and competencies required for 21st-century living (DES, 2012a; NCCA, 2017). It is intended that the changes from Junior Certificate to Junior Cycle will enable learners to be workplace-fit, better-informed and more active as global citizens (DES2019c; DES 2015b; NCCA, 2017). Indeed, the overall purpose of the revised Junior Cycle is for post-primary schools to facilitate a contemporary programme of learning characterised by 'quality, inclusivity and relevance' for generations of students in 21st-century Ireland (DES, 2012c, p.1).The Framework for Junior Cycle is a policy of reform that represents a renewed approach to learning, teaching, curriculum and assessment through an

interactive curriculum and alternative assessment procedures and practices (DES, 2015b). All aspects of the Junior Cycle are underpinned by eight principles, which include learning to learn, creativity, innovation and engagement with life outside school (DES, 2015b). In addition, eight contemporary key skills underpin all aspects of the Junior Cycle curriculum, as illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Key skills of learning in Junior Cycle education in Ireland

(DES, 2015b, p.13)

The introduction of the above key skills underpinning curriculum and assessment is a new and contemporary approach to learning in post-primary in Ireland. Indeed, the Department of Education and Skills itself recognises that the 'most significant change in the new Junior Cycle is in the area of assessment' (DES, 2012a, p.1). The Junior Cycle policy framework sets out assessment procedures to provide students with 'quality learning opportunities that strike a balance between learning knowledge and developing a wide range of skills and thinking abilities' (DES, 2015b, p.29). The changes to assessment have resulted in a 'dual approach' whereby assessment is simultaneously:

(i) formative and supports students in their learning over the three years of the Junior Cycle, and

(ii) summative in that it measures achievement at the end of the three years (DES, 2015, p.7)

The formative assessment aspect of the Junior Cycle includes the introduction of the new 'classroom-based assessment' (CBA) element. This assessment is built on the philosophy

that assessment is part of the ebb and flow of formative learning and classroom management (DES, 2012a; NCCA, 2015). Official CBAs take place at common level in each Junior Cycle subject: once in Second Year, and once in Third Year. CBAs 'have been introduced to allow students to actively demonstrate their understanding of concepts and skills and their ability to apply them' (DES, 2017b, p.15). CBAs include a broad range of activities, including oral tasks, practicals, dramatic performances, scientific performances, projects and other tasks (DES, 2017b). Assessment tasks, where students reflect on the CBAs, are set by the National Centre for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the State Examination Commission (SEC). They are assessed by a classroom teacher who will assign a descriptor (rather than a numerical grade) to reflect a student's standard within the assessment. The descriptor may be described as an ordinal categorical measurement of achievement, rather than a numerical measurement of achievement; assessment feedback terms such as 'above expectations' and 'in line with expectations' are allocated by teachers to students, and are included on their official Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) (DES, 2015b). Interestingly, where contemporary Junior Cycle assessment is concerned, given the presence of CBAs and assessment tasks in all subjects, it is recognised that 'there is a strong need to avoid overassessment and to minimise the cumulative burden on students' (DES, 2017b, p.15). In 2020, Circular 0017/2020 was distributed to post-primary schools, requiring principals to make decisions to avoid over-assessment of students: 'The principal will be responsible for ensuring that there is a balance in the scheduling of CBA assessments in order to avoid over-assessment for learners in short time-frames' (DES, 2020a, p.5). This is a new directive for schools issued by the Department of Education and Skills in relation to assessment, and it may be a result of the inclusion of stakeholder voice on the issue. Indeed, the NCCA reports that stakeholders are concerned about the academic workload and the related pressures on students (NCCA, 2018a). This will be discussed further in Section 4.3.3. The Inspectorate is scrutinising the approach of individual teachers and classroom activities in order to ensure balance in teaching and learning. One Inspectorate report criticised the onus on assessment and noted that classroom teaching was observed by the Inspectorate to be 'delivered in a manner that was overly examination-focused' (DES, 2016g, p.7).

In relation to assessment, it is this change from Junior Certificate to Junior Cycle which is of significant interest for this research. The vision for the Junior Cycle, which came into practice in 2015, is symbolic of the re-conceptualisation of teaching, learning,

curriculum and assessment which is happening in Ireland (DES, 2015b). This is the 'reform' element that is referred to in the title; this research was conducted between 2016 and 2020, a key time in the reform from Junior Certificate to Junior Cycle. Data collection occurred during the academic year 2019/2020. This period of time is exceptionally interesting in terms of assessing the value of assessment, as students were undertaking both the Junior Certificate and Junior Cycle assessment simultaneously.

Students in the case study school undertook Junior Certificate and Junior Cycle assessment as follows:

Table 5: Junior Certificate and Junior Cycle Subjects undertaken by year groups

Year group at time of data collection	Junior Certificate assessment subjects	Junior Cycle assessment (to include CBA and the assessment task)
First Year	No subjects	English, science business, Irish modern languages, art maths, home economics history, music geography
Second Year	All other subjects	English, science business, Irish modern languages, art
Third Year	All other subjects	English science business
Fourth Year	All other subjects	English
Fifth Year	All other subjects	English
Sixth Year	All other subjects	English only for those who started in 2014. The students who began post-primary education in 2013 did not undertake any Junior Cycle assessments.

In the table above, it is clear that First-Year students in the case study school were undertaking all subjects as defined by the 'new' Junior Cycle syllabus at the time this research was conducted. By contrast, some Sixth-Year students (those who took Transition Year) completed all subjects with regard to the Junior Certificate syllabus. All other students completed some Junior Cycle and some Junior Certificate assessments, depending on their year. Hence, Junior Cycle reform will have had a greater or lesser impact on students in line with their year of study, as levels of exposure to the Junior Certificate and the Junior Cycle differ. This research on continuity and reform, a case

study analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education through an evaluation of stakeholder perspectives, is important as it captures stakeholder voice at a pivotal point in time.

Prior to introducing the Senior Cycle as the 'continuity' piece referred to in the title, a final point with regard to the Junior Cycle must be noted: an additional option for Junior Cycle is available within post-primary education. The Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) aims to provide a curriculum for students who are not fully engaging in school life, and who may leave school without formal qualifications (PDST, 2020b). The JCSP is not currently offered by the case study school.

Senior Cycle

Senior Cycle education in Ireland involves a student's final years in post-primary education. Depending on local opportunities provided by each school, it may include one or a combination of the following:

- Transition Year (TY)
- Leaving Certificate Established
- Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)
- Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)

Students have many options with regard to the Senior Cycle. For example, many schools offer TY, while others do not. Similarly, many schools offer LCVP and LCA, while others do not. In order to provide a policy context for all programmes, each one will be introduced in this section.

TY is a one-year programme which was introduced to post-primary education in 1994 as an optional year between the Junior Cycle and the Senior Cycle. In 2015/16, 40,451 students (approximately 66% of the student cohort) registered for TY (O'Donnell, 2018, p.17). Currently, TY is offered by 550 out of 729 post-primary schools, which is approximately three quarters (or 75%) of all post-primary schools (DES, 2020e). However, not all students within the 550 post-primary schools will automatically gain a place in TY, as admission policies differ in each school. TY may be optional, mandatory or available for a limited number of students. In the case study school, TY is optional. However, 'applications consistently exceed the number of places available' (DES, 2016g, p.5). Such is the demand for a place in TY in the case study school that capacity has

recently been increased from two to three class, and 'efforts are ongoing to increase this to four' (DES, 2016g, p.5). Regarding assessment, there is no state assessment at the end of Transition Year (DES, 2020e). As such, local school policy in relation to Transition Year assessment varies.

The Leaving Certificate Established is a two-year programme which provides students with an opportunity to experience a broad education while simultaneously offering some specialisation (DES, 2020b). In total, 34 subjects are included by the DES on the Leaving Certificate, with assessments also offered on a non-curricular basis for other EU languages (DES, 2020b). A majority of students undertake the Leaving Certificate Established as the most mainstream option (O'Donnell, 2018; GUI, 2019b). Reform at Senior Cycle education is pending (NCCA, 2009). 95% of students in post-primary education undertake the Leaving Certificate Established (O'Donnell, 2018, p.17). This figure is consistent with the 'Growing Up in Ireland' survey data which indicates that 5% of young people leave school without completing the Leaving Certificate assessment (GUI, 2019b, p.3). The Leaving Certificate assessment is identified by the Department of Education and Skills as being used for the purpose of student selection for opportunities in relation to further education, employment, training and higher education (CAO, 2020; DES, 2020b; O'Donnell, 2018). This feature is consistent with the functionalist approach to education as discussed in Chapter Three. As a result, the Leaving Certificate Established is a high-stakes assessment.

The Central Applications office (CAO) is a limited company tasked with processing central applications for undergraduate (and some post-graduate) courses in Irish higher education institutions (HEIs). All universities, institutes of technology, colleges of education and many private and partially publicly funded HE institutions in the Republic of Ireland use the service of the CAO to select students based on Leaving Certificate Established grades (Hyland, 2011). While it is acknowledged that there are a number of routes into a HEI in Ireland, the CAO notes that the 'majority' of applications will be made through its application system (CAO, 2020, p.2). The CAO strives to 'provide fair and equal treatment' for applicants. Each grade is translated into carefully defined CAO points in accordance with the student's level: Higher (H) or Ordinary (O). Each subject of the Leaving Certificate is weighted on an equal scale in terms of CAO points, with the exception of higher level maths, where 25 'bonus' points are awarded to students achieving a grade associated with a mark of 40% or higher on the assessment paper.

Figure 4, below, illustrates the points allocation, based on student attainment in each subject:

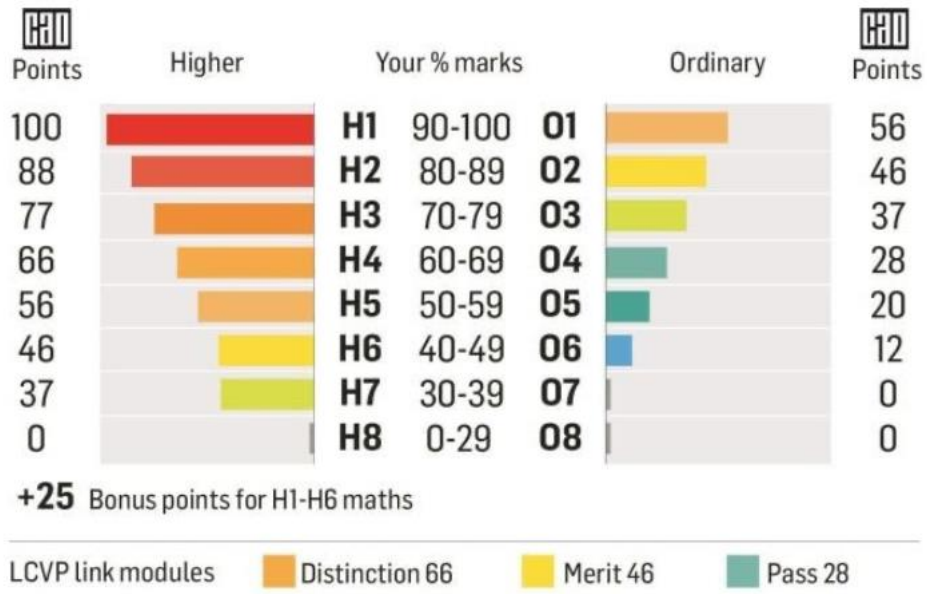


Figure 4: How Leaving Certificate assessment scores translate to CAO points

(Source: McGuire, 2017)

As illustrated in Figure 4, a student will achieve a point score for each subject in line with the assessment grade he/she receives. The sum of a student's six best scores will give a total number of CAO points for a student. Students compete for HEI courses using their cumulative CAO points total. Each year, in response to supply and demand, HEIs require different points for entry: points for all programmes may increase and decrease annually. Applicants do not know in advance what points total their chosen course will require in any given year. In addition to the Leaving Certificate Established subjects, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) also provides CAO points for students.

The LCVP was introduced in 1994 as a response within educational policy to meet Ireland's identified economic needs (PDST, 2020a). In the context of globalisation and subsequent international policy on education as outlined in Section 4.2, the LCVP is a response of the Irish government to the identified needs of industry, as it facilitates the development of skills required by industry among students, including but not limited to innovation and creativity, teamwork and communication skills (PDST, 2020a). Indeed, encompassed within the LCVP is the development of skills and competencies fundamental to vocational success (PDST, 2020a). The LCVP 'requires an emphasis on active methodology and requires a learner centred approach' (GOI, 2000, p.23). The

Government of Ireland recognises that LCVP link modules are built on the philosophy that enterprising skills and attitudes cannot be 'taught' in the traditional classroom; rather, they must be fostered through involvement in activity-based learning (GOI, 2000, p.23). This is interesting in relation to the reformed Junior Cycle and the key skills illustrated in Figure 3. In educational policy, the LCVP is described as 'an intervention' to the Senior Cycle (GOI, 2000, p.6). It prepares post-primary students for adult life by ensuring that they are educated in an alternative way to complement the established Leaving Certificate in order to cater for diversity of learning within the Senior Cycle (PDST, 2020a).

Similar to CSPE, as outlined previously, LCVP assessment includes a two-and-a-half-hour written examination (40%) and the compilation of a portfolio of coursework (60%) assembled over the two years of the programme. The portfolio supports a variety of accepted assessment items which are required in the world of work, including the development of a curriculum vitae, enterprise plans and a diary of work experience (GOI, 2000) For students taking the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, a 'Distinction' will provide 66 CAO points to a student, while a 'Merit' equates to 46 CAO points, and a 'Pass' in the LCVP provides students with 28 CAO points (PDST, 2020a; McGuire, 2017). These points can be 'substituted' for one of a student's Leaving Certificate subjects in the summation of the best six scores for that student (PDST, 2020a).

Of the 95% of the student cohort undertaking the Leaving Certificate Established, approximately 26% (circa 15,000 students annually) also participate in the LCVP (O'Donnell, 2018, p.17). However, the LCVP is not currently available in the case study school. The Inspectorate recently recommended that the re-introduction of the LCVP in the case-study school should be carried out as soon as possible (DES, 2016g, p.5). In the school's response to the WSE/MLL report (DES, 2016g, p.10), it is noted that, 'As was indicated by the Board of Management at the time of the inspection, the College is exploring the possibility of introducing LCVP in 2017' (DES, 2016g, p.10). The LCVP was not available in the case study school at the time this research was conducted (between 2016 and 2020).

A programme offered as an alternative to the Leaving Certificate Established in post-primary education in Ireland is the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Approximately 5% of Senior Cycle students undertake the LCA each year (O'Donnell, 2018, p.17). This figure is relatively consistent with other research. For example, Growing Up in Ireland research (2019b) indicates that 4% of students took the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. The LCA was introduced to post-primary education in Ireland in 1995 as an

alternative option to Leaving Certificate Established for students. It is a distinct, self-contained two-year Leaving Certificate programme aimed at preparing learners for adult and working life. As such, it is recognised by the Professional Development Service for Teachers as providing opportunities for achievement and excellence which are not recognised within the Leaving Certificate Established (PDST, 2016). Indeed, it is recognised that the LCA 'adopts a more hands-on approach to learning' (GUI, 2019b, p.2). The LCA prepares learners for the demanding transition to adult and working life by recognising a variety of skills, including communication skills, enterprise and innovation (PDST, 2016). LCA assessment is continuous and varied. Classroom work may be formative or summative, and may include projects, investigations, case studies and/or written assessments. Assessments are subsequently discussed between the students and their teachers on an ongoing basis, providing a foundation for future activities. Periodically, assessment will be structured and formalised (PDST, 2016, p.32). Key assignments may be presented through a variety of means, whether written, visual, artefact-based, photograph-based, video-based or audio-based (PDST, 2016, p.14). Students who successfully complete the programme with 120 credits or more receive a certificate (awarded in the categories of Pass, Merit or Distinction). Those who acquire fewer than 120 credits, or who leave the programme early, receive a 'record of experience' (O'Donnell, 2018, p.31). Incorporated within the LCA is a unique and reflective means of assessment conducted by the post-primary teacher. This is an entirely unique approach to assessment within the Irish post-primary system. However, the LCA was not offered by the case study school at the time of the research.

Local assessment policy

Having outlined the post-primary system in relation to national policy on entrance assessments, Junior Cycle assessment and Senior Cycle assessment, it is necessary to discuss local school policy in relation to assessment. Section 22 of the Education Act (1998, p.23) requires schools to regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). In addition to national policy on assessment, it is required within national legislation and circular directives that schools develop their own local school policies in line with the culture, ethos and needs of the students in the school (DES, 2019d; GOI, 1998). For example, in one school inspection, the Inspectorate recommended that a healthy lifestyle policy be designed for students within the post-primary school (DES,

2016g, p.3). In relation to assessment, however, it is recommended that schools adopt an assessment policy within which all relevant elements are included. Specifically, the DES (2019d, p.4) recommends that, where assessment is concerned, the following should be formally communicated to parents and students:

i. Information regarding the purpose of the assessment.

ii. Information on the identity of those with whom the assessment results may be shared, and why.

iii. Information on how and when the consent of parents and students should be obtained in advance of the assessment instrument being administered.

iv. Clarity regarding GDPR concerns.

v. An outline of the school's assessment policy in the context of other school policies.

Similarly, the Education Act notes that, within a school, the absence of information or policy guidelines may result in improper use of assessment results (GOI, 1998). Indeed, the Education Act observes the responsibility on behalf of institutions of education to ensure students and their parents have access 'in the prescribed manner […] to records kept by that school relating to the progress of that student in his or her education' (GOI, 1998, p.13). Hence, while Junior and Senior Cycle education and assessment are legislated for on a national level, it is also strongly recommended that schools develop their own local school policy in relation to local assessments and the associated data that may arise through, for example, entrance assessments.

4.3.3 Irish policy developments (stakeholder voice)

A final area of Irish policy development that must be addressed is that of stakeholder voice. This section builds on the concept of inclusion within Irish policy, which was briefly referred to in relation to CSPE in Section 4.3.2. As noted in Section 4.2, towards the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, a number of international events occurred which supported further and deeper inclusion of stakeholder voice (student voice in particular) in education. This section outlines many key events which facilitated the inclusion of the voice of all primary stakeholders (parents and students) in post-primary education in Ireland. These events are explored in three parts:

(i) Events supporting the evolution of *stakeholder voice* in Irish post-primary education.

(ii) Additional events supporting the evolution of *student voice* in Irish post-primary education.

(iii) Additional events supporting the evolution of *parent voice* in Irish post-primary education.

Policy surrounding the inclusion of stakeholder voice in education

Figure 5, below, summarises the key events which occurred in Ireland towards the end of the 20th century, resulting in the evolution of the inclusion of stakeholder voice in Irish post-primary education.

Figure 5: Summary of all key developments concerning the inclusion of stakeholder voice

In 1994, the National Education Convention in Ireland recognised the importance of the concept of 'shared dialogue' between all stakeholders in a school (including parents and students) (National Education Convention Secretariat, 1994, p.28). One year later, in 1995, the White Paper on Education was published. This document presented an outline of education in Ireland and is a key document for the inclusion of stakeholder voice. The

experience of students as passive consumers is re-envisioned, and students are encouraged to become 'critical receivers' (GOI, 1995, p.53). This White Paper for Education refers often to the National Education Convention of 1994, emphasising how important this event was for the new and contemporary vision of 21st-century education in Ireland. This white paper also recognises the voice of 'parent organisations' and their views on education (ibid, p.151). The white paper further outlines the priority to increase funding for the National Parents' Council (relating to both primary and post-primary levels) to include financial support for 'administration and parent training for participation in Boards of Management' (ibid, p.249). The provision of financial support highlighted the commitment on behalf of the Irish government to the inclusion of stakeholder voice in education.

The Education Act (1998) followed the publication of the White Paper for Education. The Irish education system is legislated for via the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998). This act was created in order for the education system to become accountable to stakeholders, including students and their parents (ibid, p.5). Indeed, the act specifies that education should be conducted 'in a spirit of partnership' between schools, patrons, students, parents, teachers and the state (ibid, p.5). Hence, it is proposed that the sentiment expressed in the Education Act is one of collaboration and inclusion of stakeholder voice. Throughout the Education Act, students and parents are regularly mentioned. Primary stakeholders are referred to in this act as a valuable source of information for schools and policymakers. This act provides that schools are responsible for including stakeholder voice and for reporting to primary stakeholders at regular intervals.

One year after the Education Act, a new vision of a partnership approach to whole-school evaluation was announced by the DES wherein 'continuous engagement with stakeholders' and the inclusion of stakeholder voice were recognised as central to policy formation and decision-making in schools (DES, 1999, p.31). A subsequent publication on the same topic in 2006 recognises and recommends that the views of parents, as members of the school community, be obtained (DES, 2006). More than two decades after the publication of the Education Act, the DES reviewed the legislation. In this review, it was found that it did 'not provide any cohesive approach or strategy to enhance how students and parents are served by schools' (DES, 2019h, p.1). In addition, the Education Act is criticised by the contemporary DES as being reactive rather than proactive (DES, 2019h). These observations of the DES provided the impetus for the Student and Parent Charter Bill (DES, 2019f). This bill will be discussed later in this

chapter. It is not included in this section, as it was not in place until very near the end of this research.

Outside of the system of education, and in relation to all systems of government, May 2013 saw the joining of Ireland with the Open Government Partnership. In joining this initiative, the Government of Ireland acknowledged responsibility for reforming all government systems transparently to eliminate corruption. As part of this initiative, the Irish government has committed to ensuring increased citizen engagement (OGP, 2013). The dawning of the 21st century involved large-scale policy development in the area of stakeholder inclusion. Additional developments for students and for parents are outlined separately. The Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill (2019f) was developed to strengthen legislation already in place concerning stakeholder voice. This bill intends to add structure and clarification, directly impacting the rights and levels of participation of stakeholders in Irish post-primary education. The bill (2019f) proposes that each post-primary school in Ireland must create, publish and operate an effective student and parent charter. If it is the opinion of the minister that a school is not adequately providing due process for a stakeholder, the minister may directly intervene. The overarching aim of this bill is for each post-primary school to have effective and responsive mechanisms for including stakeholder voice. Furthermore, the legislation aims to provide clarity where there is currently confusion in terms of including stakeholder voice, with the overall aim of promoting a new culture within post-primary schools (ibid). This is a radical shift in terms of the culture of education.

Policy surrounding the inclusion of student voice in education

The inclusion of student voice in Irish education has evolved since the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, as outlined in Section 4.2.3. Figure 6, below, highlights key developments which have occurred with regard to student voice policy and initiatives since the convention.

Figure 6: Summary of all key developments concerning the inclusion of student voice

As depicted in Figure 6, above, and introduced in Section 4.3.2, a change was made to the Junior Certificate curriculum in 1997 whereby civic, social and political education (CSPE), focusing on democratic principles and active citizenship, was introduced by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 1997). Five years later, the DES published a document entitled Student councils: a voice for students (DES, 2002). This document provides guidance for the establishment and operation of student councils within post-primary schools. Subsequently, the Irish Second-level Students' Union (ISSU) was formed in 2008 'in order to give students a voice in their education and in issues that affect them' (ISSU, 2010, p.4).

In 2010, advocating on behalf of post-primary students, the ISSU called for an increase in student voice opportunities within post-primary education. The ISSU lobbies for the inclusion of students' thoughts, experiences, feelings and knowledge in all aspects of student education in order to enrich the student experience, specifically suggesting the

following: ‘how about getting students involved and hearing what they have to say?’ (ISSU, 2010, p.6).

In 2012, ‘The Children’s Referendum’ was held in Ireland, resulting in the 31st amendment to the Irish constitution, whereby the state legally recognised and affirmed the rights of all children. This referendum was heralded as ‘a historic day’ by the then minister for children (Fitzgerald, 2012). The year 2012 also saw the introduction of Junior Cycle reform into post-primary schools (DES, 2012a). This new vision and framework for education within the post-primary sector outlines a plan for ‘fundamental changes in the approach to curriculum and assessment’ within the post-primary sector in order to ‘improve the learning experiences of students’ (DES, 2012a, p.v). Within this framework, referring to globalisation as discussed in Chapter One, it is also noted that ‘the quality of students’ participation and engagement is central to developing the skills and competences that are necessary for students in today’s world’ (ibid, p.1).

The Children’s Rights Alliance (2010) reviewed Ireland’s legislative response to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2020. The Children’s Rights Alliance recognised that ‘significant progress’ has been made for children in Ireland. The Children’s Rights Alliance listed the advances as follows (2010, p.3):

- Publication of the National Children’s Strategy (2000)
- Establishment of the National Children’s Advisory Council (2001)
- Appointment of Ireland’s first Ombudsman for Children (2004)
- Development and strengthening of child participation and consultation mechanisms, including Dáil na nÓg and Comhairle na nÓg
- Subsequent legislative reforms of the youth justice system, through the Children Act 2001

It is noteworthy that, with this list, the Children’s Rights Alliance (2010) acknowledges retrospective advances where the rights of children are concerned. The Education Act (1998) is not included. This is extremely interesting considering how central children are to the education system. Section 27(2) of the Education Act directs schools ‘to establish and maintain procedures which would facilitate student involvement’ (GOI, 1998). It must be concluded that this section is not having a significant impact, perhaps due to the lack of recognition for this act by the Children’s Rights Alliance. Regarding the practical application of policy, Fleming (2013) has observed systematic quantification of student

voice within post-primary schools. This quantitative representation of student voice could be perceived as democratic. Fleming (2013) asserts that it is carried out in the system to the detriment of a qualitative approach. Stakeholder voice has increasingly been integrated through questionnaires in the context of school evaluations (DES, 2006; DES, 2012b; NCGE, 2017). Indeed, student voice, through the use of student questionnaires and focus group interviews with students, now forms an important part of Ireland's school inspection policy, and it will continue to be developed further over the coming years (Hislop, 2012). The NCCA clearly states that it values consultation in general as a clear and established part of its work (NCCA, 2020a). Indeed, the website of the NCCA contains a page dedicated to the inclusion of 'student voice' in its work (NCCA, 2020d). At the time of writing, this page lists four items in relation to the inclusion of student voice:

- Rationale for learner voice
- Erasmus student voice project
- NCCA Learner Voice Project
- Negotiated learner curriculum (NCCA, 2020d)

Policy surrounding the inclusion of parent voice in education

In addition to the developments for stakeholders in general, as previously outlined, this section addresses the additional events in relation to parent voice. The rights of parents are observed in the Education Act (1998), to a certain degree. The National Association of Parents is referred to and defined within the act:

> an association or other body of persons established by parents with objects which include representing the views and interests of parents with regard to education and assisting parents in exercising their rights and role in the process of the education of their children. (GOI, 1998, p.7)

Numerous parent bodies represent parent voice within post-primary education. However, the NPCPP represents the voices of parents with regard to all primary schools, and, as an organisation, it has the same rights to consultation as the management and teachers' unions (NPCPP, 2020). It is interesting that, despite the title of the NCCA and the inclusion of the term 'assessment', no direct work on the inclusion of student voice in assessment is clearly referenced as an area of dedicated attention on this page at the current time (2020d). In addition, it is noted that, at the time of writing, there is no

dedicated page for the inclusion of parent voice on the NCCA website. However, the NCCA Senior Cycle Review Publication (2018, p.10) noted concern about student wellbeing. The NCCA reports that parents are concerned that their children struggle to maintain personal interests, leisure activities, sports participation and part-time work during the Senior Cycle, while students indicated that the workload of the Senior Cycle resulted in a lack of free time for extra-curricular activities, social interactions and, in some cases, sleep. Further to the Education Act and the current rights of parents where their perspectives and voice are concerned, the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill (2019f), which was published in September 2019 and which will replace the existing Section 28 of the Education Act, this refers to the inclusion of parent voice in education. The main aim of the Student and Parent Charter Bill (2019f) is to improve how schools engage.

4.3.4 Conclusion on Irish policy developments

Section 4.3 addressed key Irish policy developments regarding education, assessment and stakeholder voice. Building on the international context as discussed in Section 4.2, the participation of Ireland on the international landscape in terms of quality in education was discussed. As noted, Ireland actively participates in PISA in order to assess the international status of the education and training of its citizens. Meanwhile, at a national level, the Irish post-primary system of education is governed by a dual system of evaluation policy: inspections and school self-evaluation. The role of assessment data as part of this evaluation policy is outlined, and the Irish system of post-primary education, which includes Junior and Senior Cycle education, is introduced. Indeed, national policy in relation to post-primary assessment is outlined, and the recommendation that all schools should develop an assessment policy in line with Circular 0058/2019 is also outlined. Finally, Irish policy developments in relation to the inclusion of stakeholder voice were summarised in this section. It is noted that a number of developments have been included in relation to student voice in particular in the post-primary system. In addition, the inclusion of parent voice was legislated for in the 1998 act, which provides a strong legal position for parents. However, it is also noted that the Student and Parent Charter Bill (2019f) will also have a major impact on national and local policy in this area.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter builds upon the empirical research (Chapter Two) and wider literature (Chapter Three) on the area of education, assessment and stakeholder voice by outlining contemporary international and national policy on all areas. In order for a case study analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education to take place, the Irish policy context must be outlined. This chapter outlined the international approach towards education policy in order to contextualise Irish education policy. As noted in Section 4.2, international nations are concerned with providing quality education systems for their citizens. A number of international agreements and treaties are valued by individual nation states in regard to guidance for the evolution of education. In unifying the approach and in learning from each other, nation states can enhance quality in their individual systems. In order to gain a comparative understanding of the effective-ness of education systems, assessment data is accepted as an appropriate method for analysis and for subsequent policy development in nation states. A final aspect of international policy developments in relation to education is that of policy developments on stakeholder voice. The UNCRC was a significant development where student voice is concerned, and with it, a rights-based approach to the inclusion of stakeholder voice in education was ratified. While no such international agreement exists in relation to parent voice in education, a general consensus in relation to the participation of parents in their child's education is identified internationally. Building on the international context, the participation of Ireland in the international landscape in terms of quality in education was also discussed. As noted, Ireland actively participates in PISA in order to assess the international status of the education and training of its citizens. Meanwhile, at a national level, the Irish post-primary system of education is governed by a dual system of evaluation policy: inspections and school self-evaluation. The role of assessment data as part of this evaluation policy was outlined, and the Irish system of post-primary education, which includes Junior and Senior Cycle education, was introduced. Finally, Irish policy developments in relation to the inclusion of stakeholder voice were summarised. It is noted that a number of developments have been included in relation to student voice in particular in the post-primary system, which mirrors the international context.

Chapter Five: Methodology and data analysis

5.1 Introduction

This postgraduate research aims to contribute to the body of empirical research on stakeholder voice and assessment in the Irish post-primary education system. As discussed in Chapters One to Four, it is aimed that this research will make a contribution to the body of knowledge which has been undertaken previously in the areas of stakeholder voice and assessment (Brown, 2008; Hyland, 2011; Darmody, 2017; Fleming, 2013). In order to make an effective and valued contribution to research, a sound approach to all aspects of research design is required (Creswell, 2014). Drawing on the conceptual framework, consideration was given to the creation of an appropriate research design wherein all stages of the research were clearly and considerately applied in order to result in well-founded conclusions (Yin, 2018). A research design is governed by a range of factors, including the researcher's beliefs (ontology), the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired (epistemology), and the purpose(s) or goals of the research. This chapter seeks to outline all such pertinent issues underpinning this research. Firstly, the philosophical assumptions and phenomenological framework providing the foundation for all aspects of this research are outlined. This includes a discussion of the research paradigm, ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods adopted for the purpose of this research. An overview of the processes and procedures involved is then presented. Finally, an explanation of the phases of data analysis undertaken in this empirical research is outlined in order to clearly convey all pertinent aspects involved in the research design.

5.2 Philosophical assumptions and phenomenological framework

In order to discuss pertinent issues of the research design, it is necessary to outline the underlining philosophical assumptions and subsequent associated phenomenological framework of enquiry adopted by the researcher as the foundations underpinning the research. This section discusses all relevant aspects, including a discussion of the phenomenological research paradigm, reflections on ethical considerations and potential bias. In addition, potential limitations of this research are also outlined.

5.2.1 Research paradigm

A research paradigm may be described as a particular model which is adopted to underpin research (Kuhn, 1962) or as a 'set of beliefs and subsequent practices that guide research' (Morgan, 2007, p.47). A research paradigm determines all the parameters of the research, including how data is observed, gathered and interpreted (Gipps, 1994). Rehman and Alharthi's (2016) model has been applied to this research study, and assumptions about the following key elements are discussed in this section:

i. Ontology
ii. Epistemology
iii. Methodology
iv. Methods

Each of the four elements of the research paradigm provided a foundation for this research, as detailed in the following sections.

5.2.2 Ontology

Ontology is concerned with 'the nature of beliefs about reality' (Richards, 2003, p.33). An ontological discussion involves reflection on the nature of reality. Ontological reflection is based around the discussion of whether knowledge within the social sciences can be entirely objective, whether there is in fact a 'reality' or whether a spectrum of subjectivity must also be accepted within research. Within ontology, at polar ends of the spectrum, are positivist and post-positivist perspectives. Positivism is traditionally aligned with quantitative research, where the 'valid' and 'reliable' collection of factual and credible, objective data is concerned (Freshwater and Cahill, 2012; Coburn and Turner, 2011; Creswell, 2008). By contrast, a post-positivist (also referred to as an interpretivist or constructivist) approach rejects the argument that research can be truly objective. A post-positivist approach contends that knowledge can only be comprehended through a particular perspective, and that it therefore always includes an element of subjectivity (Freshwater and Cahill, 2012; Coburn and Turner, 2011; Creswell, 2008).

This research, however, is conducted from the ontological approach of pragmatism. Pragmatism is typically associated with issues of an epistemological or methodological nature. However, this is not exclusively the case, and pragmatism may also be utilised as a form of ontology (Pratt, 2016). As such, pragmatism offers an alternative worldview to

the polarised and opposing perspectives of the positivism and post-positivism divide. Indeed, pragmatism is useful as an ontological approach, as it is essentially 'practical' where the application of research elements is concerned (Feilzer, 2010; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Creswell and Clarke, 2007). As a result, pragmatism enables a researcher to forego the 'forced choice dichotomy between post-positivism and constructivism' (Creswell and Clark, 2007, p.27). This is particularly important in research where the perceptions of stakeholders are concerned. It is necessary for a positivist and constructivist approach to be understood, represented and applied in this research, because:

(i) a positivist ontological position of assessment data may be attributed to the Department of Education and Skills (2016d; 2017a), whereby assessment data is utilised as baseline data for target-setting and accountability throughout the post-primary education system.

(ii) a post-positivist ontological position of assessment data may be attributed to the Department of Education and Skills as described in circular 0058/2019 whereby the numerical value attributed to the assessment is not perceived as a strict indicator of baseline data for the student. Instead, it advises that stakeholders should be made aware of 'the limitations of the results of standardised tests during this discussion and the importance of other factors including the students' interests, talents and experiences, and information available from other sources' (DES, 2019g, p.5).

(iii) a pragmatic ontological approach to assessment data will allow for the perspectives of stakeholders to be gathered and analysed irrespective whether the stakeholder perspective aligns with a positivist or post-positivist approach.

Pragmatism allows for both a positivist and a postpositivist ontological approach, rather than being dedicated to or limited by one governing philosophy (Creswell, 2008). It is acknowledged that pragmatism has been dismissed by some contemporary academics as a 'vulgar' approach to research (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003, p.ix). However, it is simultaneously recognised as an approach that 'works' (ibid; Feilzer, 2009). Indeed, pragmatism focuses on the research topic and associated research questions seeking to discern the most practical, effective and worthwhile approach. Thus, a pragmatic approach to ontology was adopted by the researcher, allowing the value of assessment to

be included through both ontological positions. This pragmatic ontological approach allowed this researcher to examine the case study school, in detail, through the use of a variety of research methods. This allowed for greater depth and scope of the research, and it paved the way to answer the research question effectively and efficiently. Adhering to a particular ontological belief system leads to the development of subsequent epistemological assumptions (Rehman and Alharthi, 2016). The epistemological assumptions associated with this research will be outlined in Section 5.2.3.

5.2.3 Epistemology

Epistemology refers to 'the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge and the process by which knowledge is acquired and validated' (Gall, Gall and Borg, 2003, p.13). Epistemology involves the researcher debating 'the possibility and desirability of objectivity, subjectivity, causality, validity, generalisability' (Patton, 2002, p.134). Epistemology is concerned about the 'how' of knowledge, being the branch of philosophy that asks 'How can we know what we know?' (Grand and Booth, 2009), which is a core epistemological issue. This research was conducted through the epistemological lens of pragmatism (Patton, 2002; James and Lewis, 2012).

This research was concerned with a case study analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education through the evaluation of stakeholder perceptions. A pragmatic epistemological approach provided a mechanism through which the perspectives of stakeholders were focused upon both through positivist statistical analysis and through the post-positivist analysis of stakeholder focus groups (Cohen et al., 2011). The application of pragmatic epistemology allowed for the combination of positivism and post-positivism as required and appropriate. Indeed, a pragmatic approach to epistemology ensured that knowledge was acquired from multiple sources, thus resulting in a wider breadth of data collection from both perspectives, widening the epistemological scope of the research. Prior to a deeper discussion on the methods utilised, the methodology of this research is introduced.

5.2.4 Methodology

'Methodology' is a term which describes the 'informed approach to the production of data' within research (Ellen, 1984, p.9). It is the plan that informs a researcher's decision-

making around the appropriate application of research methods (Crotty, 1998). A case study methodology involves empirical inquiry and investigates a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Eisenhardt, 1989; Zainal, 2007; Yin, 2018). As such, a case study was conducted in this research in order to gain a rich and insightful account of views and opinions of students and parents in the case study school at a key point in time: a point at which certain aspects of assessment were continuing as they had been, while other aspects of assessment were under incremental reform. Data collection took place in the last term of academic year 2018-2019, during a time when the Junior Certificate was in the process of being replaced by the Junior Cycle, marking a critical shift in the philosophy of post-primary assessment, as discussed in Chapter Four.

A case study methodology was chosen for this research, as it was deemed appropriate in terms of conducting an in-depth study of assessment in post-primary education in Ireland at a critical time of continuity and reform. Indeed, a case study focuses on the 'how' and 'why' of contemporary events (Yin, 2018), which is focused upon in this research. Indeed, case study research is an essential form of social science enquiry, as it provides systematic, in-depth, descriptive accounts and analysis of a specific situation (Dempsey, 2001; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018). In line with a pragmatic approach to ontology and epistemology, the researcher has selected a case study as a pragmatic form of methodological enquiry for this research in order to provide an analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education through the evaluation of stakeholder perceptions. The case study approach allowed for the focus of the research to be fully explored. In addition, this approach enabled the researcher to gain access to additional (secondary) sources of information about the same case. For example, a focus group was conducted with teachers in the case study school at the beginning of this research, informing the researcher of the local policies and practices operating within the school. This will be discussed further in Section 5.2.5 of this chapter.

Eisenhardt (1989) states that case studies are well suited to new areas of research in particular. A case study methodology was therefore deemed the most informed choice for this initial research and analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education through the evaluation of stakeholder perceptions in a post-primary school. Indeed, the researcher chose to implement a single case study in line with Yin's (2012) rationale, whereby a single case study provides observations on a revelatory case. This research presents a unique and initial analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education through the

evaluation of stakeholder perceptions at a unique point in time during Irish post-primary education, as previously noted.

A revelatory case study: Introducing the case study school

In order to conduct this research in an appropriate case study school, a number of aspects needed to be considered by the researcher. Purposeful sampling was employed, as it was a challenge to secure permission for research to take place on this topic. Due to the nature of the research and the chosen single case study methodology, a specific type of post-primary school was required to provide both an in-depth but also a well-balanced understanding and representation of the central phenomenon involved in the research (Creswell, 2014). The case study school within which this research took place is a large co-educational community school consisting of almost 1,000 students. It is the only school in a large town, a satellite town of a large city in Ireland. The town has experienced a large increase in population over the past number of years and is home to a diverse population (CSO, 2016). The case study school is multi-denominational and operates as part of the Education and Training Board (ETB) system. The school is operating at full capacity; demand for First Year places is oversubscribed. The school offers the Junior Certificate, Junior Cycle, Leaving Certificate and an optional, but also over-subscribed, Transition Year (TY) programme. However, the school does not offer the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme nor the Leaving Certificate Applied. This school was considered and selected as the revelatory single case study location for this research for the following reasons:

- As previously noted, the case study school is a co-educational community college. It is the only post-primary school in the large town in which it is located. As such, the school is the centre of education in the area, and it supports a large and diverse community.

- The case study school offers a range of assessments to students, from First Year to Sixth Year, including state assessments and in-house assessments at Christmas and summer. In addition, the case study school suspends the school timetable in February and administers a set of formal assessments to all students, from First Year to Sixth Year. This 'February assessment' is a unique approach which is not widely practised in Ireland. It makes the school an interesting case where an analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education through the evaluation of stakeholder perceptions is concerned.

- The school offers an optional TY programme. A cohort of students applies and competes for limited places. While some students are successful in their application for TY, others are not, and must continue to Fifth Year. They join a cohort of students who do not apply for Transition Year. Again, this makes for an interesting case where an analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education through the evaluation of stakeholder perceptions is concerned.

- This school uses assessment data as baseline information on student attainment in the absence of a school assessment policy (DES, 2016g, p.3). This also provides for interesting case study research where the analysis of assessment through the evaluation of stakeholder perceptions is concerned.

A revelatory case study: Potential limitations of this approach

The factors contributing to a case study analysis have been outlined and discussed. As with any methodological approach to research, a case study analysis has certain limitations. Firstly, a single case study is analogous to a once-off experiment (Yin, 2018), and the researcher is aware that a single case study may therefore represent common and/or atypical situations (Eisenhardt, 1989; Brown, 2011). Hence, in implementing a single case study methodology, the researcher was aware that it may not be appropriate to apply the knowledge gained from the case study to other situations in a specific way. Indeed, it is noted that, by its very nature, a single case study may not be entirely

representative of the greater population. With regard to this analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education, the findings may not be entirely representative of all stakeholders in all post-primary schools in Ireland. However, as noted, and not withstanding this important issue, this case study analysis represents initial research in the area, and it was conducted in order to respond to a gap in the literature (as discussed in Chapters Two and Three). As a result, this case study research will add to the body of knowledge in the subject area even if only in a 'modest' way (Rowley, 2002, p.16).

An additional potential limitation of this research, as a result of the methodological approach chosen, involves the quantitative data. Quantitative research methods were undertaken, as outlined in Table 7. However, the sample sizes involved in the quantitative research are small, and it was therefore not possible to conduct inferential statistical analysis on the quantitative data. The quantitative data gave rise to descriptive analysis, which is advantageous in that it contributes to the descriptive narrative regarding the case study school. The methods chosen for this research, and the advantages and challenges associated with each method, will be further introduced and outlined in the next section of this chapter.

5.2.5 Methods

Research methods are defined by Rehman and Alharthi (2016, p.52) as 'specific means of collecting and analysing data'. A range of data collection techniques are featured in the literature on previous research where the perceptions of stakeholders in education are concerned. These include both quantitative and qualitative methods such as surveys, verbal reports, observations, self-reflective essays, portfolios, tests and exams, vignettes, scales, classroom artefacts and metaphor analysis (Brown, 2011; Darmody, 2017; Schraw and Olafson, 2015). The researcher is aware of the 'long-lasting, circular, and remarkably unproductive debates' which occur within the paradigm and methodological discussions (Feilzer, 2010, p.6). In addition, the Department of Education and Skills advocates a pragmatic approach to school self-evaluation via the gathering of evidence, through multiple sources, both qualitative and quantitative (2016). In order to include the benefits of both approaches, and to mirror the approach which is recommended by the Department, a pragmatic approach to methods was chosen for this research, and both quantitative and qualitative methods were implemented. A pragmatic approach to methods and data collection enhances the discovery of information and the building of knowledge rather

than focusing on the positivist/post-positivist divide (Hanson, 2008; Grant and Booth, 2009).

A mixed model design was implemented in this research (Burke-Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). All data was collected simultaneously in the case study school during a window of time deemed appropriate by school management (between March and May of 2019). Hence, in this research, both quantitative and qualitative methods were utilised, as detailed in Tables 6 (qualitative data) and 7 (quantitative date). A pragmatic approach to data collection was deemed advantageous, as the researcher negotiated access to stakeholders within the daily and weekly operation of a busy post-primary school. The researcher worked pragmatically with the opportunities provided to gather data during the operation of the school timetable and the teaching, learning, management and other daily activities of the school. A pragmatic approach to data collection allowed for a range of data to be collected at a time that was least disruptive to the case study school and its community.

Qualitative methods: Considerations

In implementing qualitative research, exploration and discovery are emphasised (Nelson and Quintana, 2005). By exploring and discovering the experiences of stakeholders through qualitative methods, a researcher may further understand their perceptions (Denzin, 2010). This research provides an analysis of assessment in post-primary education through an evaluation of stakeholder perceptions. Qualitative research was appropriate for this type of research, as it provides space and time for participants to explore, explain and elaborate on their experiences and perceptions (Levin, 2010). In addition, when using qualitative methods, a researcher has the opportunity to be responsive and adaptive in his/her approach, and he/she can clarify and explore responses in greater detail as required (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Amrein-Beardsley, 2008).

However, qualitative methods present some challenges in their implementation. Due to the flexibility of response on behalf of the researcher, as outlined above, the researcher may impact upon the research process (Denscombe, 2010; Bryman, 2008). Hence, awareness of this potential impact is of high importance for the researcher. This type of interference can be minimised by:

- being aware of this issue from the outset and during all aspects of data collection
- including all data for analysis, including unusual/idiosyncratic data.
- being aware and mindful of the context during data analysis (Bryman, 2008).

Simultaneously, a researcher must not

- oversimplify data
- underplay or disregard perceived unsuitable data (Bryman, 2008).

During this research, NVivo software was used to assist with data management and analysis. This process will be outlined in Section 5.3.2 of this chapter. This section is concerned with introducing the methods used in the data gathering phase of the research. Table 6 outlines the key information pertaining to the qualitative methods undertaken by way of an introduction to these methods. A discussion of the qualitative methods follows.

Table 6: An outline of the qualitative methods undertaken in this research

Method	Sampling technique	Cohort	Brief note on purpose (in line with the research question)
Interview	Purposive Sampling	Director of Assessment, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.	This auspicious interview was undertaken at the very beginning of data collection. This interview enabled the researcher to gain a greater understanding of the national policy narrative around assessment, which informed subsequent decision-making.
Focus Groups (Teachers)	Purposive Sampling	One focus group with teachers was facilitated (n=7). Participants were all members of the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Department within the case study school.	The SEN Department was purposefully selected, as it fulfils a number of assessment-related functions in the case study school. For example, it - leads and coordinates all aspects of entrance assessment, including the management of data. - teaches and assesses 'regular' subjects (e.g. business, English, etc.) - was commended in the most recent WSE/MLL (2016) as being a pivotal influence within the school The SEN Department operates from a unique position in terms of assessment within the case study school: it is aware and involved in all aspects of assessment, from entrance to exit.
Focus Group (Students)	Stratified random sampling employed for all year groups. Resorted to convenience sampling in the case of 6th year students only.	1st Year 2nd Year 3rd Year 4th Year 5th Year (did not do TY) 5th Year (did do TY) 6th Year (n=42)	Group interview to explore the topic and gain in-depth understanding of the perspectives of students at all stages of post-primary school.
Focus Group (Parents)	Stratified random sampling was attempted. Convenience and snowball sampling were subsequently implemented	n=7 (all female)	Group interview to explore the topic and gain in-depth understanding of the perspectives of parents.

Qualitative methods

Qualitative methods are concerned with the 'what' and the 'how' of phenomena (Patton, 2002). They allow for complex and in-depth understanding (Creswell, 2014; Denzin, 2010). Qualitative methods may generally be described as a conversation with a purpose (Sheppard, 2004). In the literature, seven types of interviews are outlined: structured, semi-structured, unstructured, one-to-one, group, focus group and Internet interviews (Sheppard, 2004; Naoum, 2007; Creswell, 2008). This research involved two lines of qualitative enquiry:

(i) An interview with the NCCA Director of Assessment

(ii) Focus groups with stakeholders

Qualitative methods were included in this research in order to gain a rich, in-depth understanding of stakeholder perspectives through dialogue and interaction (Naoum, 2007). Qualitative methods facilitate research 'through the eyes of the people' taking part in the research (Bryman, 2004, p.441). The rationales for including an interview and a focus group are discussed below.

Interview

An interview was conducted with the Director of Assessment of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) as the first step in the data collection process. The interview schedule was compiled in line with themes arising from the literature review. The proposed questions were provided to, and approved by, the interviewee in advance of the interview (Appendix E). The interview lasted for one hour, and a transcript was produced and emailed to the interviewee as requested. The function of this interview was to further inform the narrative of the case study research from an NCCA perspective. The points made by the NCCA Director of Assessment informed all subsequent stages of the research, including the interview schedule for the focus groups and the content of the survey instrument. The inclusion of an interview with the Director of Assessment with the NCCA was serendipitous and auspicious, particularly as access to a discussion/interview with the Inspectorate was denied.

Focus group

A focus group is a group interview, conducted in order to explore a certain topic (Bryman, 2008). A group approach facilitates an opportunity for participants to engage in meaningful conversation about the subject under research (Patton, 2002). The objective of a focus group is to create a space in which participants can consider their own views in the context of hearing the views of others (Denzin, 2010). It is intended that the discussion within the group facilitates insight (ibid). Focus groups produce data which may be descriptive or explanatory (Creswell, 2008). Conducting qualitative research is a valuable way of uncovering information that is typically not collected during quantitative techniques (Blaxter et al., 2010). However, during research, a researcher must be aware of the nature and dynamic of a focus group. Patton (2002) advocates a dynamic in which the participants are strangers to one another, a scenario which was not possible in the present research, due to the case study methodology of this research. However, focus groups were conducted in line with Creswell's (2008) vision, whereby each focus group was a carefully planned discussion facilitated in a comfortable, non-judgemental environment. Denscombe (2010) argues that, compared with surveys, a focus group allows for a personal element in research, which is important where the collection of data referring to perspectives is concerned.

Qualitative research involves live events. The researcher adopted a flexible and responsive approach at all times within the qualitative research process. As a result, the output of each focus group was unique. A number of questions were prepared for each focus group. However, not all questions were asked, due to time constraints and/or the unique flow of each group. Denscombe (2010) suggests that a researcher should be well prepared and actively reflective throughout the research. As a result, the interview and focus groups were audio-recorded. Recordings were subsequently transcribed, which enabled repeated reflection on the data (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012). Each focus group had a one-hour duration.

Focus group with teachers

The voice of teachers was included in this research following the interview with the Director of Assessment (NCCA), in order to further contextualise the case study research. The inclusion of this group of seven teachers involved purposive sampling. The 'Special Educational Needs Department' (SEN Department) orchestrates all elements of

psychometric assessments in the case study school. In addition, all members of the SEN Department are also subject teachers. Their subjects include business, English, Irish, religion, CSPE, maths and work application, and they are aware of all associated assessment elements. As such, this department is very experienced in all areas of assessment, including psychometric assessment, and its members are therefore gatekeepers of highly valuable information. In addition, these teachers were selected as, during a WSE/MLL inspection, it was observed that 'The special educational needs department has become a pivotal influence in developing teaching and learning' (Department of Education, 2016, p.2). A plain-language statement (Appendix F) and consent form (Appendix A) were provided to all participants prior to the focus group taking place. A schedule of questions was designed for the purpose of this focus group (Appendix C). However, many of the questions were not required, as discussion took its own direction during the focus group. Each teacher was coded through a 'teacher number' based on where he/she was sitting during the focus group (e.g. Teacher4).

Focus group with students

Seven focus groups were held with students. A focus group was held with First-, Second-, Third-Year, TY and Sixth-Year students. Two focus groups were held with students of Fifth Year: one group consisted of students who did TY, and one group consisted of students who did not do TY. Stratified random sampling was implemented for all student focus groups, with the exception of Sixth-Year students, where convenience sampling was undertaken. This was due to the fact that Oral Leaving Certificate assessments were taking place, and the majority of Sixth Years were not available to partake in the research. All student focus groups involved three male and three female participants. A plain-language statement (Appendix F) and consent form (Appendix A) were provided to all participants prior to the focus group taking place. A schedule of questions was designed for the purpose of this focus group (Appendix D). However, many of the questions were not required, as the discussion took its own direction during each focus group, and every focus group discussion was unique, in line with the experiences and perspectives of the participants.

In transcribing the data, the identities of the participants were coded. Each student was given a unique student label which included the year of the student and the gender of the student. For example:

1stYrStudent1F: a female First-Year student

5thYrStudent(didTY)3M: a male student in Fifth Year, who did TY

5thYrStudent(noTY)2F: a female student in Fifth Year, who did not do TY

This coding assisted with clarity on all aspects of data analysis and maintained the anonymity of the student in line with the agreement outlined in the consent form.

Focus group with parents

It was very difficult to include parent voice in this research. Parents did not readily respond to the invitation to particulate in either the surveys or the focus groups. Stratified random sampling was originally implemented in order to invite parents to participate in this research. However, no parents agreed to participate. As a result, the focus group with parents was facilitated through convenience sampling, where one parent agreed to participate, followed by snowball sampling (this single volunteer encouraged and facilitated the participation of the others). Seven parents (all female) took place in the focus group, and each parent was provided with a number (e.g. Parent1). A plain-language statement (Appendix F) and consent form (Appendix A) were provided to all participants prior to the focus group taking place. A schedule of questions was designed for the purpose of this focus group (Appendix B). However, many of the questions were not required, as discussion took its own direction during the focus group.

In summary, the qualitative phase of data collection for this research consisted of an interview and several focus groups with stakeholders as outlined. Additional quantitative data collection also took place, and will be discussed in the next section.

Quantitative methods: Considerations

Quantitative methods provide a means to explore phenomena by administering and analysing numerical and statistical techniques. These techniques include but are not limited to deduction, hypothesis testing, prediction and standardised data collection (Aliaga and Gunderson, 2002; Johnson and Christensen, 2012). Quantitative methods are advantageous, as they generally allow for expedient data collection and analysis, and because they are based on positivist, and therefore objective, mathematical principles (Denscombe, 2010; Feilzer, 2010). Notwithstanding these considerations, quantitative

methods were utilised in this research in order to gain a statistical understanding of assessment data in line with evidence-based data, as recommended by the DES (2016, 2017). A positivist approach to data gathering was utilised in order to gather information on stakeholder perceptions for a large number of participants in the case study school within an efficient timeframe. However, quantitative methods may not fully allow all aspects of the participant experience to be presented or subsequently gathered and analysed as data. Quantitative methodologies may lead to limited answers, and therefore limited outcomes where research is concerned (Denscombe, 2010). Table 7 introduces the quantitative methods utilised for this research. Following the table, a discussion of the quantitative methods used is presented.

Table 7: An outline of the quantitative methods undertaken in this research

Method	Sampling Technique	Cohort	Brief note on purpose (as it corresponds to the research question)
Survey of views (students)	Cluster Sampling	One class group (30 students) from each year 1st to 6th, inclusive (n=180). 100% uptake of the survey occurred, as students were present within the school building.	This survey was distributed to students in order to investigate student views on aspects of assessment arising from the literature and the interview with the NCCA Director of Assessment.
Survey of views (parents)	Purposive Stratified Sampling	One group of parents, those with students in TY (n=46) 45% participation by parents	This survey was carried out in order to investigate parent views on aspects of assessment arising from the literature and the interview with the NCCA Director of Assessment.
Statistical Analysis (of assessment data)	Purposive Stratified Sampling	Outgoing 6th Year students in 2018 (n=138)	This cohort was chosen, as it was the most up-to-date and complete data set available in the school. Pearson's correlation was calculated between all sets of assessment data in order to (i) mirror the correlations provided in the teacher handbook accompanying the GL CAT4 Assessment. (ii) understand the relationship between incoming assessment psychometric baseline data and assessments in post-primary school
Statistical Analysis (of assessment data)	Purposive Stratified Sampling	Outgoing 6th Year students in 2018 and 2017 (n=298)	Calculation of the potential CAO points increase amongst students to investigate the potential impact of the LCVP on summative data. The calculation was undertaken at the behest of school management to investigate and quantify possible 'added value' to a student's Leaving Certificate if the LCVP was introduced into the school.

As introduced in Table 7, two distinct approaches to quantitative methods were utilised in this case study research. Survey data was collected from parents and students, and assessment data was analysed. These methods are recommended by the Department of Education and Skills in multiple publications (2015e; 2016a; 2016b; 2016b; 2016g). Hence, a survey instrument and statistical analysis of assessment data were chosen for the purpose of this research. Rationales for including each approach are outlined below.

Survey instrument

The use of survey instruments is well-established within social science research; they are implemented in order to gain insight on a number of topics within education, including attitudes, beliefs and perceptions (Darmody, 2017; Bulmer, 2004). Surveys were selected for this research in order to gain an understanding of the perspectives of a large number of stakeholders. Surveys are 'easy to administer and score, measure multiple constructs within a single set of questions, are amenable to sophisticated statistical analyses, and provide a comparative baseline across different studies' (Schraw and Olafson, 2015, p.92). Additional benefits of surveys include flexibility, adaptability, speediness and ease of administration (Bryman, 2008). In addition, dichotomous questions within surveys are useful in that they encourage respondents to choose a definitive and decisive answer rather than potentially providing irrelevant or overly extended responses (Cohen et al., 2011). Similarly, closed-ended surveys are easier and faster for the recipient to complete, facilitating fully completed answers and avoiding irrelevant or absent responses (Creswell, 2018). Notwithstanding the benefits of survey instruments, challenges to their creation and implementation also exist. For example, Bryman (2008) notes that survey questions can be ambiguous to participants. In addition, structures and closed-ended questions can be a source of frustration for respondents who may feel limited in terms of the answers they can give (Denscombe, 2010). Furthermore, as recognised by Cohen et al. (2011, p.284), the 'visual aspect of surveys becomes relevant in internet based surveys'. However, this may prove to be distracting for participants. In addition, levels of computer literacy amongst respondents can be varied, which may be problematic. In order to combat potential barriers to participation, a researcher should be mindful when designing a survey instrument. For example, clear instructions must be provided to participants in order to counteract any confusion (Creswell, 2008). In this research, the survey instrument was carefully selected and designed in order to investigate key aspects of assessment highlighted in the literature review process and points made by the NCCA

Director of Assessment. Closed-ended questions were chosen for this research in order to facilitate processes of analysis in parallel with the more flexible and open-ended questions of the focus groups (Fellows and Liu, 2003). The initial survey, distributed to parents and students during the pilot phase, was an adapted version of Brown's (2004, 2006) research on the following:

(i) student perspectives of assessment

(ii) teacher perspectives of assessment

Brown's inventories are well-recognised as survey instruments, and they have been used in many international studies (Darmody, 2017; Brown, 2011; Daniels et al., 2014). In Brown's inventories, respondents are asked to indicate their level of agreement with statements relating to educational assessment (Brown, 2004, 2011). Recent research on teachers' perspectives of assessment within the Irish system was undertaken by Darmody (2017), using Brown's instrument. Darmody (2017) found that Brown's inventory aligns with the Irish context. Hence, a shortened version of Brown's instrument was implemented in the pilot phase of this research.

A pilot study is a trial and assessment of an instrument (Blaxter et al., 2010). A group of stakeholders who were not involved in the research engaged with the piloted survey. Convenience sampling was employed for the pilot stage of the survey instrument. Feedback on the pilot study was provided. This led to the (re-)design of an improved instrument. The final Student Survey (Appendix J) and the Parent Survey (Appendix I) mirror each other in terms of structure and content.

Prior to distributing the re-designed survey instrument, consideration was given to sample size, proportionate representation and sampling strategy. Cluster sampling was employed for the distribution of the survey instrument amongst stakeholders. One class group in each year was randomly selected to participate in the survey. In addition, one group of parents (those who had students in Transition Year) was invited to participate in the parent survey. In this way, a mutually homogenous yet internally heterogeneous group was selected, ensuring a probability-based sample.

All participants were informed of the purpose of the research, and all relevant ethical and GDPR issues were addressed through the distribution of a plain-language statement (Appendix F) and consent form (Appendix A). Creswell (2008) asserts that self-administrated surveys ensure a higher response rate. This was experienced in this research, as 100% of student surveys were completed, while, in the case of parents, the

survey was distributed through the school communications list, and the response rate among parents was 45%.

Statistical analysis of assessment data

In order to analyse assessment data statistically, the most recently graduated class group was selected (the class of 2018). Upon consideration of the research question and the exploratory aim of this research, descriptive statistics were chosen over inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics involve measuring different aspects of a population, and they include the calculation of correlations (Bikel and Lehmann, 1975). Descriptive analytics were chosen for this research, as no interventions were planned, and the researcher's aim was to collect data and outline findings (Ravid, 2020). All assessment information was inserted into an Excel spread sheet. Although designed initially for business applications, spread sheets are also 'extremely well-suited' to statistical use (Bakeman and Robinson, 2005, p.4). Data was cleaned and prepared for analysis in line with the CAO points system (Figure 4). This mirrored that of the CAT4 assessment provider GL Assessment in its calculations, whereby the 'equivalence between the Ordinary and Higher grades as set out in by the CAO was used to combine results from the two levels to a common scale' (GL Assessment, 2020, p.203). An example of the cleaning/preparation process is as follows: In a case where a student scored a grade such as A, B or C in an assessment, the median percentage associated with that grade was selected, and this percentage was subsequently translated into CAO points. For example, a Higher-Level B grade translated to a percentage of 77.5%, which in turn translated into a CAO points score of 77. This value of 77 was used to represent the Higher-Level B grade for the purpose of analysis. The assessment score therefore became relative, and it was ready for the process of correlation, which is a process often used in descriptive research to compare the relationships between measures (Ravid, 2020). This data analysis took place in order to measure 'the strength of the relationship between two variables', thus gaining an understanding of how a result in one assessment may relate to a result in another (GL Assessment, 2020, p.180).

In summary, the quantitative phase of this case study research consisted of the gathering and analysis of statistical analysis of assessment results and survey data. This positivist approach was conducted in addition to the post-positivist approach. Indeed, a mixed

methods approach was utilised for the purpose of this research. The considerations involved in a mixed methods approach are discussed in the next section.

Mixed methods: Considerations

As indicated previously, in line with a pragmatic research paradigm, a mixed model approach was selected for the purpose of this research. This pragmatic approach to research, involving the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, ensured a certain breadth and depth of research (Johnson et al., 2004). A mixed methods approach to the single case study is advantageous, as it allows multiple sources of evidence to be utilised, and it will therefore provide a foundation for synchronicity (Yin, 2018). The mixed model approach provided the researcher with an opportunity to balance inherent weaknesses, as outlined, with the inherent strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods (Creswell, 2008; Hanson, 2008; Feilzer, 2010). Indeed, in the context of a pragmatic ontological and epistemological perspective, the researcher decided to integrate mixed methods as the most pragmatic means of enquiry into participant perspectives. It is the combination of different methods which helps to uncover deep insight (Bryman, 2008; Johnson and Christensen, 2012; Creswell and Clark 2011). A mixed methods approach is pragmatic and advantageous, as it recognises the importance of traditional quantitative and qualitative research, and it offers itself as a third paradigm which provides fully informed, complementary balanced and useful research results (Green, 2007). Notwithstanding these benefits, some challenges in implementing a mixed methods approach have been identified in the literature. Specifically, a mixed methods approach to data collection requires the researcher to have a broader degree of skills (Ahmed et al., 2016; Denscombe, 2010). In addition, there are certain challenges where the integration of research findings is concerned (ibid). The integration of data was a challenge in this research. The processes chosen for integrating the data for the purpose of presentation and discussion are discussed in Section 5.3. Prior to this discussion, aspects of validity and reliability of the research at large are outlined.

5.2.6 Validity and reliability

Research must be reliable and valid for the process and conclusions to be credible (Shipman, 2014). Validity is concerned with the accuracy, authenticity and objectivity of all aspects of research (Creswell, 2008). The researcher was highly cognisant of validity,

and she purposefully adopted a mixed model approach in order to strengthen the descriptive findings and conclusions. The goal of reliability is to minimise errors and bias (Yin, 2018). Reliability is a key principle of research integrity in that it ensures the quality of research is reflected in all aspects of the research, from design and methodology to the analysis and use of resources (ALLEA, 2017).

Every effort was made throughout all stages of this research to ensure reliability and validity, as appropriate to this mixed model case study on the views of stakeholders. Yin (2018) suggests that a researcher should conduct a case study by imagining that someone is monitoring every single step of the process, or that an audit could be undertaken at any stage. All aspects of this research were undertaken in line with this suggestion.

5.2.7 Ethical considerations

Ethical issues arise throughout all phases of a research process. Bryman (2008) argues that ethical issues must be considered to validate the veracity of the research. In order to appropriately engage with and reflect on all ethical considerations essential for contemporary research, the researcher engaged with the following key processes which are integral to postgraduate research in Dublin City University (DCU):

Participation in DCU's Research Integrity Training Programme.

Successful application to DCU's Research Ethics Committee for permission to undertake research where the participation of human participants is intended

The Research Integrity Training programme engaged with aspects of best practice in research to ensure the highest standards of integrity for DCU researchers in line with the DCU Code of Good Research Practice (DCU, 2015). This training programme covered a number of essential topics, including, but not limited to, an overview of the National Policy Statement on Ensuring Research Integrity in Ireland (IUA, 2019) and the eight principles of research integrity as per the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA, 2017). All aspects of this research were conducted in line with the eight principles of research integrity, and close and consistent contact was maintained with the two academic supervisors of this postgraduate research. This ensured that the researcher remained supported and accountable at every stage of the process.

In applying to the Research Ethics Committee in DCU for permission to carry out the research, a number of critical ethical issues were considered and outlined by the

researcher. For example, where the perspectives of human participants, particularly children, are involved, due consideration and child protection/safeguarding must be strictly upheld. The research design proposed for this research was presented to Dublin City University's Research Ethics Committee, and permission to carry out this research was sought. Issues such as the vulnerability of participants were reflected upon at length. In particular, careful consideration was given to the participation of students aged under 18 years. In order to maximise safety for these participants, the researcher discussed all aspects of the research with school management in advance of this research. A number of potential difficulties were anticipated, and safeguards were agreed with school management in advance of engaging with students. For example, it was agreed that students would be clearly informed of their right to opt out of the research at any stage. Parents and students were provided with a plain-language statement, and parents were invited to sign a consent form allowing their children to take part in the research. In addition, it was noted that if students disclosed any information which could indicate a child protection issue, the Designated Liaison Person within the school (the principal) would be informed, and subsequent supports would be put in place. This protocol is in line with local school policy and DCU child protection policy and procedures.

In addition, where all participants (students and parents) are concerned, it was recognised by the researcher that a participant could potentially feel vulnerable providing opinions on assessment. In order to avoid potential risk, the following measures were taken and were clearly communicated to participants both orally (in the pre-participation information session) and in writing (in the plain-language statement and consent form). At all times, the researcher ensured that participants knew:

- they were under no obligation to participate in the research.

- they could opt out of the research at any time.

- they would be anonymous in all aspects (pseudonyms would be used in the focus group account)

- they could retract their content at any time, up to the time of publishing.

- that data would be destroyed upon completion of the project, in line with GDPR legislation.

Research commenced once written approval was granted by the committee. All research requirements and conditions as outlined by the committee were adhered to during the

research process. For example, a plain-language statement (Appendix F) and an informed consent form (Appendix A) were distributed to, and collected from, all participants prior to the beginning of the survey and the focus group. Consent means that a person knowingly, voluntarily and intelligently – and in a clear and manifest way – gives his/her consent to participate in the study (Armiger, 1997). Most importantly, participants were informed of all relevant rights, including those of confidentiality, anonymity and data protection, outlined by GDPR (2018). The college-based contact details of the researcher, of the university and of the research supervisors were provided to participants in the event that any questions, issues or concerns arose. The researcher applied to DCU's Research Ethics Committee seeking approval for research in winter 2018. All aspects of the study were approved in winter 2018.

5.2.8 Bias

This section discusses the potential issue of researcher bias in three stages of the research:

(i) Quantitative data collection
(ii) Qualitative data collection
(iii) Data analysis

The steps undertaken by the researcher to minimise bias are outlined. Where research is concerned, bias management can be a significant challenge (Chenail, 2009). In order to minimise bias in this research, the researcher reflectively managed both data collection and data analysis procedures in consultation with her supervisors. With regard to the collection of qualitative data, open questions were asked, and the interviewer spoke as little as possible in order to allow participant discussion to flow (Chenail, 2009). This resulted in each focus group taking its own direction, and it minimised researcher bias. The researcher is a fully qualified and experienced guidance counsellor and guidance counselling supervisor, and she used active listening skills accredited in her previous post-graduate training at QQI Level 9, to minimise her input and bias during the qualitative phase of data collection.

Where quantitative data is concerned, it is incorrect to assume that questionnaires are easy to design and use, despite their current prevalence (Rowley, 2014). Indeed, quantitative methodologies may not be entirely objective, due to the involvement of human decision-making during the research process (Denscombe, 2010). Quantitative researchers employ discretion and choice through decision-making during the research process, which may

influence the findings. In order to minimise researcher bias during the data collection phase of this research, an initial survey was piloted as outlined in Section 5.2.5. Generation of the final survey instrument involved reflections from pilot participants on this initial instrument, which minimised researcher bias.

Regarding the analysis of data and researcher bias, the researcher closely followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. A computer software package, NVivo, was utilised, and the researcher attended training on the use of this programme. The process involved in data analysis is outlined in detail in Section 5.3. In carefully applying the defined stages of thematic analysis, the researcher minimised bias. In addition, the researcher communicated regularly with her supervisors to ensure the highest standards of research integrity, thus further minimising bias.

5.3 Data analysis

Data analysis can unravel the 'surface of reality' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.9). It involves a process of classifying, comparing, weighing and combining data from all stages of the research process (Rubin et al., 2004) Data analysis was carried out by the researcher over a period of five months, as depicted in Figure 7. During this process, the researcher was mindful that all data must be treated ethically, respectfully and carefully in order to minimise and eliminate response bias or inaccuracies in reporting (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2015; Creswell, 2008).

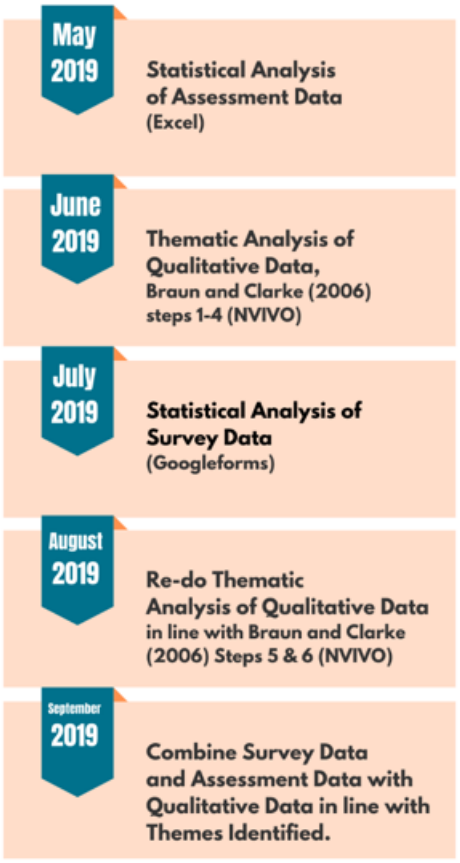


Figure 7: Timeline of data analysis

5.3.1 Preliminary analysis of assessment data

The DES (2016, pp.12-14) recommends analysing assessment data as a starting point for whole-school evaluation. Hence, as a starting point in the data analysis process, statistical analysis of the assessment data from the school began the process. The aim of the statistical analysis was to investigate the relationship and the level of correlation between assessment results in post-primary education. A correlation coefficient (r) provides a numerical value ($-1 \leq r \leq 1$) to demonstrate the level of relatedness or connection between one variable and another. This process is undertaken by GL Assessment with regard to its CAT4 assessment and subsequent post-primary assessments, as outlined in Chapter Two. In order to mirror this process, the researcher mapped students' quantitative scores to all assessment results, from their first examination in post-primary education ('The Entrance Exam') to their final examination (the Leaving Certificate), both inclusive. In the case study school 'assessments of incoming students are based primarily on cognitive ability tests, in place of tests in English and Mathematics but retaining Irish' (DES, 2016h, p.4). For this reason, the results for English, Irish and maths were chosen for inclusion in

this research. As outlined in Table 7, assessment data from the graduating class of 2018 was utilised in this research, with one exception: assessment data from 2017 was also utilised with regard to Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme statistics at the behest of school management. The results from this statistical analysis were included in this research in order to provide insight into the issue of using assessment data as a baseline for the purpose of goal setting, as recommended by the Inspectorate (DES, 2016g). Once this process was completed, thematic analysis of the qualitative data was undertaken.

5.3.2 Thematic analysis

Choosing an approach to data analysis too early in the research process can narrow one's analytic field of vision and limit all aspects of the research design (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2008). Hence, thematic analysis was chosen for this research, in consultation with research supervisors, once all data had been collected (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic data analysis enabled the researcher to categorise, code, analyse and present the mixed model data in a clear and logical way. It allowed for in-depth analysis of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

NVivo software was utilised for the categorisation, coding, analysis and presentation of the qualitative data initially. This process is described in this section. Subsequent to this, the quantitative data was woven into the thematic analysis as appropriate. Creswell (2008) observes that analysis involves the organisation of data into themes. Cohen et al. (2007) observe that data analysis involves categorising, comparing, making links and drawing conclusions. Subsequent to the statistical analysis of the assessment data, thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data through NVivo. Researchers must give appropriate consideration to all aspects of the research design in order for the research to be properly illuminating (Bryman, 2008). In order to provide a descriptive account of the perspectives of stakeholders' value of assessment in post-primary school, thematic analysis was implemented.

Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is the most advantageous method of analysis, particularly for first-time researchers. Thematic analysis identifies, analyses and reports on patterns (themes) within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.6). Different versions of thematic analysis are underpinned by various philosophical and conceptual assumptions. Thematic analysis may be used irrespective of the epistemological or theoretical perspective underpinning the research (Braun and Clarke, 2013). As such, it

is a pragmatic method of analysis which aligns with the ontological and epistemological design of this research. Thematic analysis is a flexible tool which can provide a rich and detailed account of data collected (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.78). With regard to data analysis, this research followed the 'recipe' outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Phase One: Familiarisation with the data

The researcher frequently reflected on each element of data collection during the data collection process and, to a greater extent, immediately after each element took place. Within a week of each qualitative element being conducted, transcripts were typed verbatim. Each transcript was then double-checked with a final review of the document in full while listening simultaneously to the audio. This further familiarised the researcher with the data. Familiarisation with the quantitative data also occurred, as the assessment results and survey data were reviewed and reflected upon. In transcribing the data, general patterns of meaning were observed. During Phase One of the data analysis process, the following conceptual map of themes was sketched by the researcher:

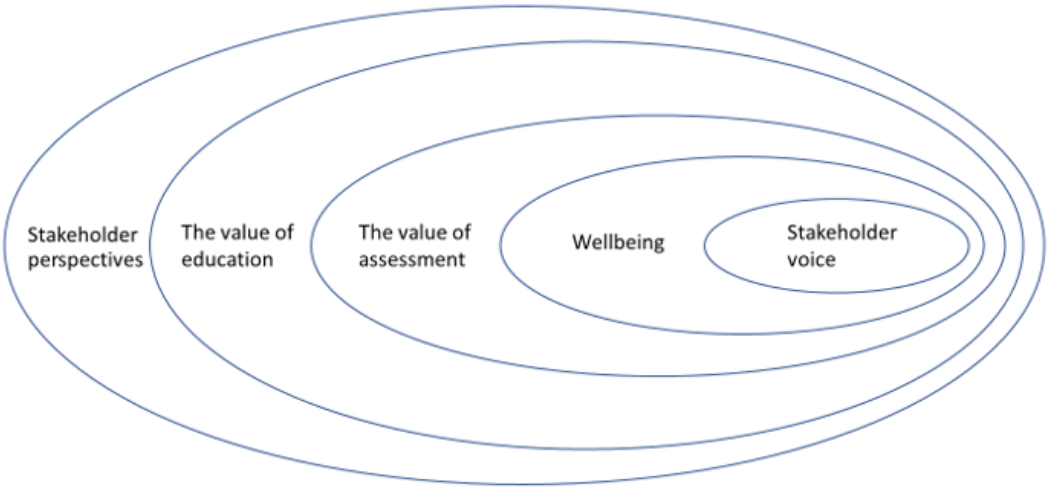


Figure 8: Initial conceptual map of emerging themes

Figure 8 highlights the initial 'way of thinking' of the researcher as analysis of the qualitative data began. At this point, the researcher understood that all data collected was a subset of stakeholder perspectives. In addition, views on assessment are closely connected to views on education and wellbeing. The smallest set in the initial conceptual map is that of 'stakeholder voice', representing the view expressed repeatedly by stakeholders that their voice was not heard within the case study school. In creating this

initial conceptual map, it was acknowledged that it would develop into a subsequent vision of emerging themes in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) process.

Phase Two: Generating initial codes (open coding)

The second phase of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis involved a process of open coding for the generation of initial codes. This research was analysed through a semantic approach. With a semantic approach, themes are identified within the surface meanings of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The qualitative data was systematically organised using the 'open coding' function of NVivo's software package. Codes were not pre-set by the researcher prior to this phase; rather, codes were created in line with the content of each focus group. Codes were generated in line with participant responses, and were modified as appropriate. Generating initial codes involved deconstructing the data from its original chronology into an initial set of non-hierarchical codes. In total, 58 initial codes were generated during this stage of the process. Table 8 is a screenshot of some of the work undertaken during Phase Two of the coding; it provides an example of how initial coding was generated.

Table 8: Example of how initial coding was generated (Phase Two of thematic analysis)

Phase Two:	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded	Phase Two: Generating Initial Coding	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
Accountability	5	19	Pressure of Assessment itself	8	23
Assessment equals exams	3	3	Pressure to achieve	1	2
Baseline Data	7	34	Redefining Culture	7	17
CBA	9	55	Role of teacher	9	35
Competition	6	11	scheduling difficulties	4	7
Government Level	6	17	scheduling difficulties (2)	4	7
Lack of freedom	4	8	Student Council	2	7
Lack of time	5	14	Student Voice	3	10
Agency Voice	1	3	Subjects that include student voice	2	9
Anti-function	9	52	Support Human Development within the post primary system of Education	1	1
Christmas	2	3	Support Societal Development as part of p.p. education system in Ireland	1	2
Confidence	4	7	Teach for Test	8	20
Confusion	5	14	Teacher level	1	1
Define Student Voice	1	2	Transition Year	3	17
Entrance Exams	8	41	Trust	2	2

As depicted in Table 8, the number of interviews coded for each initial code and the number of units of meaning within each initial code can be seen. The allocation of this coding took place through a process of 'open coding', as described above, and prefaced Phase Three, which involved developing the categories (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Phase Three: Searching for themes (developing categories)

Phase Three of Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis involves searching for themes. A theme 'captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.10). This phase involved reviewing the initial qualitative codes identified in Phase 2 and identifying the overlapping themes throughout all nine focus groups and the interview. This process involved merging, re-naming, distilling and clustering related codes into broader categories to reconstruct the data into a framework that made sense in order to further the analysis and address the research questions and aims of the study. Many of the codes fitted into an overall theme. For example, most of the codes could be defined within the umbrella theme of 'the function of assessment'. The themes identified were predominantly descriptive.

Table 9: Example of how the themes were searched for and categorised (Phase Three of thematic analysis)

Codebook: Phase Three	Interviews Coded	Units Coded
Assessment Management	10	332
Economic Development and Production of Labour force	6	16
Function of Assessment	10	216
Human or Individual Development	7	27
Societal Development and Active Citizenship	2	10
Wellbeing in relation to processes of Assessment within the post primary system	10	171
Wellbeing within the post primary System of Education	8	46
The Value of Assessment within the post-primary System of Education in Ireland	10	378
The Value of the Education System in Ireland	8	56
Wellbeing in the context of Assessment within the post	10	213

Table 9 provides an example of how themes were categorised in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) Phase Three of thematic analysis. For example, the 'function of assessment' was coded in 10 different interviews and was referred to 216 times by participants within those 10 interviews. This phase precedes Phase Four of thematic analysis.

Phase Four: Reviewing themes (drilling down)

Phase Four of Braun and Clarke's (2006) process involves the reviewing and modification of preliminary themes into concise, clear, distinct and reorganised categories in order to better understand the meanings embedded therein. The data in each theme was read and re-read in order to confirm that the data supported the theme. The division of data into thematic groups was followed by an extensive period of review, aiming to ensure correct classification. Table 10 provides a screenshot example of how themes were reviewed.

Table 10: Example of reviewing themes/drilling down (Phase Four of thematic analysis: reviewing themes)

Phase Four: Reviewing Themes	Interviews Coded	Units of Meaning Coded
Assessment Management	10	332
Government level	6	17
Redefining culture	8	70
Culture of assessment	6	46
Grinds	2	5
Part of curriculum	2	2
School-management level	10	154
School-based examinations	9	66
State examinations	10	88
Teacher level	10	91
Confusion	7	33
Role of teacher	9	35

In Phase Four of the thematic analysis, a process of 'drilling down' takes place, wherein themes are reviewed. This process takes place in order to reorganise the data clearly so that themes can be more clearly named and defined in the next phase of the process.

Phase Five: Defining and naming themes (data reduction)

Braun and Clarke's (2006) fifth phase involves identifying 'the essence of what each theme is about' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.92). Essentially, this theme involves conceptually mapping and collapsing categories into a broader thematic framework. Table 11 provides a screenshot of Phase Five of the process, highlighting Theme One and the sub-themes within Theme One. Theme Two and Theme Three were defined and named in the same way.

Table 11: Defining and naming themes (Phase Five of thematic analysis)

Phase Five
Theme One: The purpose of assessment links with the value of assessment
The purpose of assessment: supports an individual's learning
The purpose of assessment: access to opportunity
Certification
Stepping stone
The purpose of assessment: accountability within the system
The purpose of assessment: anti-function

During Phase Five of the data analysis process, the process of defining and naming themes is undertaken. As a result, the initial conceptual map of the findings (Figure 8) was re-designed, as illustrated in Figure 9, below.

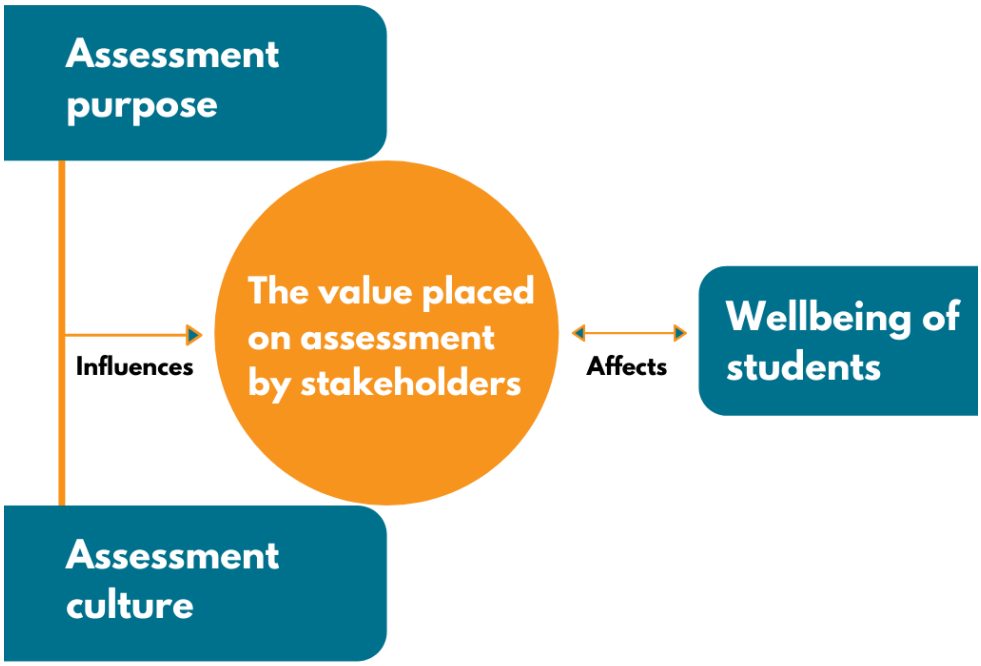


Figure 9: Redefined conceptual map of emerging themes

The data collected in this research is explored in line with the following research question: what is the value of assessment in the post-primary system of education, from the perspective of stakeholders? The data collected in this research shows that stakeholders (parents and students) value assessment with regard to three main themes:

Theme 1: Stakeholders perceive assessment through the purpose of the assessment

Theme 2: Stakeholders perceive assessment through the culture of assessment

Theme 3: Stakeholders perceive that post-primary assessment has an impact on student wellbeing.

The production of a final report became possible after the final stage of data analysis. The complicated story of data gathering became clear. Chapter Six of this research is based on the final report for this research.

5.3.3 Analysis and integration of the quantitative data

Once thematic analysis of the qualitative data had begun as described, Google Forms and Excel were utilised to collate, analyse and present the survey findings. As discussed, the purpose of the survey data was to obtain descriptive rather than inferential data in order to facilitate a greater number of views to be expressed and represented in this case study

research. Descriptive statistical analysis of the survey data involved tabulating all data collected from each focus group.

The researcher is aware that a challenge associated with mixed model research is that of the effective presentation and analysis of the data collected (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003). Indeed, Bryman (2008) has observed that researchers often exclusively report either quantitative or qualitative data, without integrating the two. This approach ultimately frustrates the initial aim of utilising a mixed model approach in the first place, as outlined. This research, however, aims to collate an accurate account of the findings to bring together qualitative and quantitative components of the landscape (Bryman, 2008). The researcher considered writing two separate chapters for quantitative and qualitative data analysis. However, a single chapter was considered a better fit for this project, as it enabled the setting out of both types in close proximity, which effectively highlights inconsistencies or contradictions in the conclusions drawn from each.

Once Steps 5 and 6 of thematic analysis of the qualitative research had been completed (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the researcher allocated the quantitative data into the themes and sub-themes arising through thematic analysis. The survey data was subsequently integrated into the themes as identified in the qualitative data (outlined in the previous section). This pragmatic approach to data analysis was implemented in line with the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher, as discussed. In many instances, the quantitative data complemented the data gathered in the qualitative research. However, not all information gathered from the different methods was aligned. This is not unique to this research. While there are many advantages to a mixed model approach, Creswell (2014) observes that there is little guidance regarding how to resolve discrepancies that emerge between the two types of data, even where one is weighted more heavily than the other. However, the purpose of this research is to provide a descriptive account of the perspectives of stakeholders regarding the value of assessment in the Irish post-primary system. Hence, where discrepancies emerge in this research, this will be noted by the researcher and will be advantageous in terms of the production of data for future research in the area.

5.4 Chapter summary

In order to make an effective and valued contribution, all research must be underpinned by a sound approach to all aspects of research design (Creswell, 2014). This chapter

outlined the philosophical assumptions and phenomenological framework providing the foundation for all aspects of this research. All pertinent issues underpinning this research were outlined, including the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher and the methodology and methods adopted. Pragmatism was adopted for the purpose of this research study, as it bridges the gap between the polarised and opposing perspectives of the positivism and post-positivism divide. Pragmatism is useful, and indeed valuable, as it adopts an appropriate, practical and research-centred approach to all aspects and elements of a research design. Pragmatism allowed for this research to be conducted in a practical and time-efficient manor with minimum disruption to the teaching, learning, management and other activities taking place in the post-primary school while simultaneously gathering rich and in-depth data on the subject of assessment. Positivist statistical descriptive analysis and post-positivist thematic analysis of focus group data was undertaken in order to provide an integrated and aggregated presentation of the data. Indeed, this chapter provided a detailed rationale for including a single case study and mixed methods in this research. This resulted in balancing inherent methodological weaknesses and the strengths of a single methodological approach.

Chapter Six: Presentation and analysis

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline and present all data gathered during the mixed model research phase outlined in Chapter Five. The purpose of this research is to contribute to previous research undertaken in the area of assessment (Hyland, 2011; Darmody, 2017; Banks et al., 2018) and stakeholder voice (Fleming, 2013; Ui Chonaill, 2018; Twohill et al., 2018; Darmody, 2017; O'Grady, 2017), in Irish post-primary education, as discussed in Chapter One. Indeed, this research is aimed at informing discussions (i) within the local case study school and (ii) with regard to national policy concerning post-primary assessment in Ireland through an analysis of stakeholder perspectives. Hence, a clear and succinct research question which provided a framework for this research was identified:

- What is the perception of post-primary assessment among stakeholders in a case study school in Ireland during a period of simultaneous continuity and reform?

In order to answer this question and develop a deep understanding of the perspectives of assessment held by students and parents, this research also addressed the following secondary questions:

- What are the benefits of assessment within a post-primary school?
- What are the challenges of assessment within a post-primary school?

As discussed in Chapter Five, mixed methods were implemented in this case study research in order to answer these three research questions. Over-surveying of stakeholders has previously occurred in the Irish context, which, as Fleming (2013) identifies, leads to the minimisation of qualitative voice. It is also noted that limiting research to small qualitative samples may also be problematic (ISSU, 2010). Hence, a mixed method approach was adopted for this research. However, this led to the challenge of how to best present the empirical findings as found in the mixed methods approach. In order to effectively present the empirical findings, it is essential to consider the following:

i) The clear structure provided by the process of thematic analysis of the qualitative data

ii) The three research questions outlined above

iii) The theoretical perspective of functionalism chosen as a lens for this research.

The consideration of these three factors led to the presentation and organisation of the empirical data in a particular structure as outlined in Section 6.2, below.

6.2 Organisation of this chapter

This chapter outlines the data collected in the case study school to address the primary and secondary research questions. The researcher is aware that a challenge associated with mixed model research is that of the effective presentation and analysis of the data collected (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2003). Bryman (2008) has observed that researchers often exclusively report either quantitative or qualitative data, without integrating the two. This approach ultimately frustrates the initial aim of utilising a mixed model approach in the first place, as outlined. This research, however, aims to collate an accurate account of the findings to bring together qualitative and quantitative components of the landscape (Bryman, 2008). A single chapter on the empirical findings is a best fit for this research, as it enables the setting out of both types in close proximity, which effectively highlights inconsistencies or contradictions in the conclusions drawn from each. As noted in Chapter Five, thematic data analysis enabled the researcher to categorise, code, analyse and present the qualitative data in a clear and logical way while simultaneously allowing for in-depth analysis of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The quantitative data was subsequently integrated into the three primary themes as identified in the qualitative data and discussed in Chapter Five. This pragmatic approach to data analysis was implemented in line with the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher, as discussed.

The three main themes arising from the qualitative data are detailed below:

- Theme 1: Stakeholders perceive assessment through the purpose of the assessment
- Theme 2: Stakeholders perceive assessment through the culture of assessment
- Theme 3: Stakeholders perceive that post-primary assessment has an impact on student wellbeing

The empirical findings will be presented through analysis of the above three themes. In addition, each theme will be addressed in relation to the three research questions. Each theme will also be summarised and reflected upon with regard to functionalism, as the chosen theoretical perspective integrated as a lens for this research.

6.3 Empirical data: An overview of the main themes and sub-themes

As discussed in Chapter Five, qualitative data arising from the nine focus groups and one interview were transcribed in full and analysed in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, through the use of NVivo software. Thematic analysis of the data indicated each of the three identified themes. Each of the three main themes consists of a number of sub-themes, as identified in the qualitative data. The themes and sub-themes identified through thematic analysis of the data are illustrated in Figure 10:

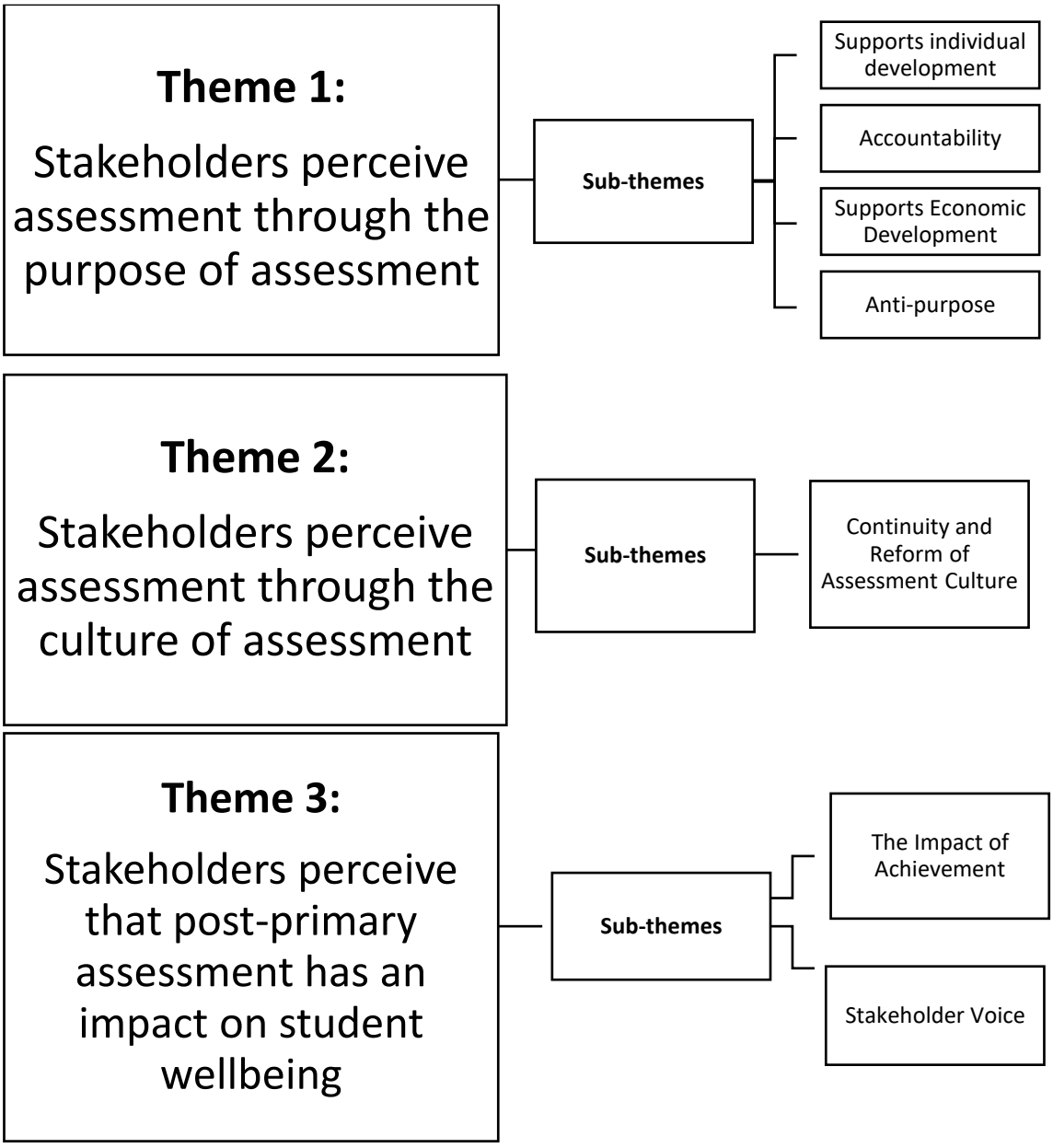


Figure 10: Themes and sub-themes identified through thematic analysis of the qualitative data

As discussed in Chapter Five, the qualitative data included seven focus groups with students (n=42), one focus group with teachers (n=7) and one focus group with parents (n=7). The qualitative data also included one interview with the Director of Assessment from the NCCA. The quantitative data included one survey of students (n=180), one survey of parents (n=46) and an analysis of one set of assessment results for the class of 2018 (n=138).

To provide structure to this chapter, all empirical data is presented under the themes and sub-themes which were identified in the thematic analysis of the qualitative data, as illustrated in Figure 10. All themes and sub-themes are explored in relation to the research questions and through functionalism, as the theoretical framework.

6.4 Theme One: Stakeholders perceive assessment through purpose

This section outlines empirical data collected with regard to the purpose of assessment. Figure 10 highlights that the 'purpose of assessment' was a clear theme arising from the qualitative data. This research found that stakeholders understand the purpose of assessment in relation to four categories or sub-themes, as illustrated in Figure 10:

(i) Assessment supports individual development.

(ii) Assessment supports accountability within the post-primary system.

(iii) Assessment supports economic development.

(iv) Assessment anti-purpose: assessment can be perceived by stakeholders as being without purpose.

These four sub-themes are discussed in relation to the empirical data in this section. As previously noted, this section contains the qualitative data coded in the initial six phases of thematic analysis identified by Braun and Clarke (2006). In addition, applicable quantitative data has also been woven into each sub-theme in order to provide a complete and comprehensive account of stakeholder perspectives within the case study school.

6.4.1 Theme 1, Sub-theme 1: Assessment supports individual development

This section provides an overview of the empirical data in relation to stakeholder perspectives, where the first sub-theme (assessment supports individual development) identified within the first theme (the purose of assessment) is concerned. This section explores the empirical data in relation to the following:

(i) assessment and individual development

(ii) the absence of assessment and individual development

(iii) implications of the sub-theme for the research questions and the theoretical framework of functionalism underpinning this research

Theme 1 is concerned with the purpose of assessment. Empirical data gathered in this research indicates that stakeholders perceive assessment as providing support for individual student development in terms of the following:

Assessment and individual development

The empirical data from both qualitative and quantitative sources indicates that stakeholders perceive assessment to be important for the development of the student within the post-primary education system. Within the student focus groups, students explained that they felt that assessment is important as it provides a summative and relative account of learning and progression within the system. Students explained that they perceived assessment within post-primary education as important due to this purpose:

> It shows you where you are at and what you can improve on. (TYStudent3F)
>
> It shows you yourself what you can do if you put your mind to it.
> (5thYrStudent (noTY)2F)

For students, assessment provided summative evidence of learning. This narrative among students with regard to the positive attributes of summative assessment was consistent amongst all year groups from First to Sixth Years. It is very interesting and thought-provoking that students indicated that they reflect on the summative results as an indicator of areas in which they can improve, as noted in the quotations above, and of what they

can actually achieve if they 'put their mind to it' (5thYrStudent (noTY)2F). This indicates that students believe that the summative purpose of assessment is as an accepted measure of evidence in terms of effort or work rate as opposed to evidence of ability.

The survey data generally reflected this perception in relation to two aspects of assessment included as questions in the survey:

- A large proportion of students agree that assessment makes them responsible for their learning (illustrated in Table 12, below)
- A large proportion of students agree that assessment motivates them and makes them try their best (illustrated in Table 13, below)

In relation to students agreeing that assessment makes them responsible for their learning, Table 12 shows that a relatively consistent group from each of the student year group indicated agreement with the statement. In addition, it was only students in Senior Cycle (5th and 6th Years) who strongly disagreed with this statement.

Table 12: Assessment makes me responsible for my learning (by year group)

Year group		***Disagree Strongly***	***Disagree***	***Indifferent***	***Agree***	***Agree Strongly***
1st Year	*Count*	0	2	6	20	2
	%	0%	1.11%	3.33%	11.11%	1.11%
2nd Year	*Count*	0	10	1	18	1
	%	0%	5.55%	0.55%	10.00%	0.55%
3rd Year	*Count*	0	11	7	12	0
	%	0%	6.11%	3.88%	6.66%	0%
4th Year	*Count*	0	3	12	13	2
	%	0%	1.66%	6.66%	7.22%	1.11%
5th Year	*Count*	2	9	9	8	2
	%	1.1%	5%	5%	4.44%	1.11%
	Count	3	5	0	19	3
6th Year	*%*	1.7%	2.77%	0%	10.55%	1.66%
	Count	5	40	35	90	10
Total	*%*	2.8%	22.22%	19.42%	0.50%	5.55%

n=180

Indeed, Table 12 shows that almost 56% of students agreed/strongly agreed that assessment makes them responsible for their learning, while almost 25% disagreed/strongly disagreed.

Table 13 further adds to this issue and highlights students' perspectives on the impact of assessment on their individual development. This data addresses the impact of assessment on student motivation.

Table 13: Assessment makes me try my best (by year group)

Year group		***Disagree Strongly***	***Disagree***	***Indifferent***	***Agree***	***Agree Strongly***
1st Year	*Count*	1	1	5	16	7
	%	0.56%	0.56%	2.78%	8.89%	3.89%
2nd Year	*Count*	4	5	3	13	5
	%	2.22%	2.78%	1.67%	7.22%	2.78%
3rd Year	*Count*	0	8	6	12	4
	%	0%	4.44%	3.33%	6.67%	2.22%
4th Year	*Count*	0	4	7	16	3
	%	0%	2.22%	3.89%	8.89%	1.67%
5th Year	*Count*	0	10	6	11	3
	%	0%	5.56%	3.33%	6.11%	1.67%
6th Year	*Count*	0	9	7	10	4
	%	0%	5%	3.89%	5.56%	2.22%
Total	*Count*	5	37	34	78	26
	%	2.78%	20.56%	18.89%	43.33%	14.44%

n=180

From Table 13, it is interesting to note that, once again, the majority of students (58%) agreed/strongly agreed with this statement, while 23% disagreed/strongly disagreed. These results are proportionate to those outlined in Table 12. However, it was Junior Cycle students (1st and 2nd Year) who strongly disagreed with this statement. This is in contrast to Table 12, where Senior Cycle students strongly disagreed with the statement connecting assessment to responsibility, which is interesting.

Hence, student perspectives in relation to the impact of assessment on individual development are mixed yet consistent from a quantitative perspective. A cohort of students agreed that assessment impacts on individual responsibility and motivation. Data from the focus group is consistent with this, and students explained that it is the summative and relative aspect of assessment data that provides a measure of their individual development, which is advantageous, according to students.

In relation to the perspectives of parents, data from the focus groups confirmed that parents recognise the role of assessment where the individual development of their child is concerned.

> My elder daughter tells me it really helps her to keep on top of her work, having the exams.
> (Parent 5)

> Some of them [assessments] are clearly beneficial in terms of focus and checking.
> (Parent 4)

It is observed that parents recognise the developmental role of assessment in terms of the effort and work rate of students in terms of 'keeping on top' and 'focus and checking'. Similarly, the quantitative survey data showed that 89% of parents (n= 41) indicated that they 'strongly agree' or 'agree' that assessment is important for their child's learning. Hence, it is clear that parent conceptions are in line with student conceptions with regard to the purpose of assessment and its connection to individual development.

The absence of assessment and individual development

Analysis of the empirical data shows that Transition Year (TY) is interesting in relation to individual development. Transition-Year students in the case study school do not sit any state exams at the end of TY, nor are they timetabled for any local assessments during the academic year. They are the only cohort who are not timetabled to sit Christmas exams or the February assessments, nor are they timetabled for summer assessments. The focus groups at large, however, noted the development it affords the students who apply successfully for TY. Students discussed the benefit of TY as follows:

> I remember being, at the start of TY, completely different to how I was at the end of it. I felt a good bit more mature than I was, definitely.
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)1M)

> That is a regret [not doing TY], because I know, me going into Fifth Year, now, I know I wasn't ready.
> (5thYrStudent(noTY)3F)

In addition, parents noted the importance of Transition Year for the development of their children:

> My daughter has had an excellent year in TY […] Here is the year when you are trying to develop the child.
> (Parent 2)

> We are encouraging her to use her time in Transition Year to develop skills she's not already familiar with.
> (Parent 4)

It is interesting that both students and parents perceive TY as an opportunity to mature and develop in the absence of assessment. This has interesting implications for the final two years of Senior Cycle education in the case study school, wherein student cohorts are composed of two distinct groups: those who have completed Transition Year and those who have not. In the context of point (i), above, and the perceived importance of assessment for individual development, it was hypothesised anecdotally at a local level that the Transition Year added CAO points to an individual student's assessment results. That is to say that students achieved higher grades after completing Transition Year than they would have had they progressed directly to Fifth Year. It is believed locally that the students who undertake Transition Year do better in their subsequent Senior Cycle assessments than their non-Transition-Year counterparts, as they are one year older after having completed the TY year. This adds an aspect to the perceived purpose of assessment in terms of individual development, as it is hypothesised that individual students would achieve assessment success in line with their age and their associated level of maturity, rather than with regard to other factors such as ability or work rate.

In order to research the link between age- and assessment-related achievement, descriptive statistical analysis was employed for one year group (the class of 2018), and relevant correlation coefficients were calculated in order to explore the relationship between age and assessment results. Students who completed TY were one year older than those who did not complete the optional year. Hence, in this case, the correlation coefficient (r) relates to the connection or relationship between the age of the student and the grade he/she achieved in each assessment for Fifth Year and Sixth Year (n=138).

Table 14: The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades (n=138)[1]

	English *r*-value	English *p*-value	Irish *r*-value	Irish *p*-value	Maths *r*-value	Maths *p*-value
Student Age and 5th Summer Assessments	0.20	0.019*	0.29	0.001*	0.22	0.010*
Student Age and 5th February Assessments	0.17	0.046*	0.19	0.026*	0.15	0.079
Student Age and 5th Christmas Assessments	0.19	0.026*	0.29	0.001*	0.16	0.061
Student Age and 6th Christmas Assessments	0.22	0.010*	0.17	0.046*	0.20	0.019*
Student Age and 6th Mock Assessments	0.23	0.007*	0.32	0.000*	0.20	0.019*
Student Age and Leaving Certificate	0.07	0.415	0.05	0.56	0.06	0.485

From Table 14, above, it is clear that, for all subjects, 'r' had a lower and upper boundary: $0.05 \leq r \leq 0.32$. These correlations may be described as being weak. Indeed, these correlations highlight that there is a low positive correlation between age and assessment performance. This leads to four interesting observations:

[1] Items with a *p*-value of less than 0.05 are significantly different. Significant items are marked with a *. Correlation among the variables is evaluated using the Pearson correlation coefficient. Please see Appendix H for more information.

- Local (school-based) and national (state-based) assessments yield similar correlation coefficients with regard to age and assessment performance.
- The low positive correlation indicates that a strong relationship does not exist between the age of a student and his/her assessment results in Senior Cycle post-primary education.
- The low positive correlation indicates that TY does not impact on assessment attainment, as age does not correlate strongly with assessment results.
- The weakest correlations were consistently those relating to the high stakes Leaving Certificate assessments, indicating that there is an almost non-existent relationship between age and the final assessment of post-primary education.

Implications of the sub-theme for the research questions and theoretical perspective underpinning this research

In relation to the three research questions, this sub-theme (the purpose of assessment and its impact on individual development) provides an insight. With regard to the primary research question, 'What is the perception of post-primary assessment among stakeholders in a case study school in Ireland during a period of simultaneous continuity and reform?', it is clear that summative assessment functions as a relative measure of learning for students. For many students, assessment also acts as a motivating influence, with the majority of students also taking responsibility for their learning and their assessment results. Parents tend to agree that assessment serves a positive purpose with regard to student learning. Whereas functionalism is concerned with social order, assessment processes in post-primary school are fulfilling an important function: they are providing students and parents with information on the relative positioning of the individual from the earliest stages of post-primary education. Stakeholders in the case study school described a confidence that their work rate and effort will be reflected in their summative results. Hence, it is argued that, irrespective of reform in the post-primary sector, stakeholders declare a continued continuity of belief that assessment will enhance individual development in terms of summative assessment. Regarding maturity and 'other' development, however, stakeholders perceive TY as providing an opportunity to

add to learning outside of the system of assessment. Assessment, therefore, enhances individual development in relation to the continued summative system of assessment, while TY provides students with an opportunity for a different type of learning. The benefit of assessment in relation to this sub-theme is the perception that assessment is a measure of student academic status at any given time. The challenge of assessment in relation to individual development, however, is the focus on attainment which detracts from other types of individual development.

6.4.2 Theme 1, Sub-theme 2: Assessment supports economic development

The second sub-theme with regard to the purpose of assessment emerging from the qualitative data was that of the role of assessment in supporting economic development. Just as stakeholders perceived the summative role of assessment in measuring the relative position of students as important, stakeholders acknowledged the role of assessment with regard to accessing economic opportunities within society. The empirical data indicates that assessments are perceived by stakeholders to improve work prospects either directly or indirectly. Specifically, data obtained from this mixed model research highlights that stakeholders perceive assessment as key to the purpose of supporting the economic development through the development of the labour force in two interlinked ways:

(i) Certification of assessment is perceived as a means for competition and access to specific jobs.

(ii) Assessment processes are perceived as a stepping stone to future qualifications.

Each of these aspects is addressed below. In summary, the research questions and the theoretical framework of functionalism underpinning this research are addressed in relation to this sub-theme.

Certification of assessment is understood as a means of competition and access to specific jobs

Throughout all the focus groups, students consistently demonstrated an acute awareness of the meaning and importance of certification which would be attainable as a result of assessment throughout their post-primary education. Students explained that certificates and qualifications provided options and opportunities:

> Gives you power.
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)1F)

> You can't really do anything without it.
> (3rdYrStudent1M)

This is interesting from a functionalist perspective: students perceive that certificates received as a result of post-primary assessments provide 'power' in the form of opportunity. This indicates that students are aligned with and have 'bought' into systematic processes for the distribution of capital as per the functionalist theoretical perspective. In addition to the data collected in the focus groups, the survey instrument confirmed that stakeholders perceive certification as an important part of the education process, as illustrated in Table 15, below.

Table 15: I value certification as part of the education process (by stakeholder group)

Stakeholder Group		*Disagree Strongly*	*Disagree*	*Indifferent*	*Agree*	*Agree Strongly*
1st Year	*Count*	0	1	7	18	4
	%	0%	0.45%	3.14%	8.07%	1.79%
2nd Year	*Count*	1	4	10	11	4
	%	0.45%	1.79%	4.48%	4.93%	1.79%
3rd Year	*Count*	4	6	10	6	4
	%	1.79%	2.69%	4.48%	2.69%	1.79%
4th Year	*Count*	0	4	10	13	3
	%	0%	1.79%	4.48%	5.83%	1.35%
5th Year	*Count*	1	7	6	12	4
	%	0.45%	3.14%	2.69%	5.38%	1.79%
6th Year	*Count*	3	1	12	11	3
	%	1.35%	0.45%	5.38%	4.93%	1.35%
Parents	*Count*	0	3	3	30	7
	%	0%	1.35%	1.35%	13.45%	3.14%
Total	*Count*	9	26	58	101	29
	%	4.04%	11.66%	26%	45.29%	13%

n=223

As illustrated in Table 15, the majority (58%) of students and parents who answered this survey question (n=180 students; 43 parents) perceived certification as an important part of post-primary education. It is noteworthy that the data is distributed similarly in terms of proportion across the year groups of the students and the parents. Hence, the quantitative empirical data show that the majority of stakeholders perceived assessment as fulfilling the purpose of providing certification to students. However, not all stakeholders agreed that certification is an important aspect of the post-primary education system. Indeed, a variety of positions are evident as regards stakeholder opinions on certification, as outlined in Table 15.

Assessment processes are perceived as a stepping stone to future qualifications

In addition to the observations on certification as outlined above, many stakeholders noted the purpose of assessment in relation to accessing future opportunities and qualifications. To introduce this finding, focus group data is firstly presented. This data indicates that stakeholders perceive assessment as providing access to economic opportunities. Stakeholders explained that the purpose of achieving in assessment is to utilise it as a 'stepping stone' to future societal and economic opportunities:

> They [parents] are pushing it [study for assessment] on me, saying 'you kind of have to do college if you want to get a good job', so they, like, they value assessment, and so do I, as the way to get into college. You have to do well in assessment to get into them.
> (5thYrStudent(noTY)1M)

> I know I won't get anywhere if I don't
> (1stYrStudent3F)

The first quote above is interesting in relation to the potential impact of parents' perspectives on subsequent perspectives. From this quote, it is reasonable to conjecture that a functionalist culture is passed from student to parent. It is also interesting that a student in the first year of post-primary education observes the potential impact of certification in relation to her medium-term future opportunities.

The Leaving Certificate is perceived as critical for accessing viable future options.

> If you don't get high points in your Leaving Cert, then that's your life over.
> (5thYrStudent(noTY)3F)

> if you don't, like, do good in the Leaving Cert, then you don't get a job, and then you, like, don't get money, and then you, like, don't get food, then you, like, die.
> (1stYrStudent2F)

> if I fail, it will be the end of the world.
> (5thYrStudent(noTY)2F)

The survey data also confirms this perspective, as presented in Table 16, below, wherein stakeholders stated the extent to which they agreed that assessment is important for future opportunities.

Table 16: Assessment is important for future options (by stakeholder group)

Stakeholder Group		*Disagree Strongly*	*Disagree*	*Indifferent*	*Agree*	*Agree Strongly*
1st Year	*Count*	1	2	7	15	5
	%	0.45%	0.9%	3.15%	6.76%	2.25%
2nd Year	*Count*	2	2	8	15	3
	%	0.9%	0.9%	3.6%	6.76%	1.35%
3rd Year	*Count*	2	2	6	10	10
	%	0.9%	0.9%	2.7%	4.5%	4.5%
4th Year	*Count*	1	4	8	16	1
	%	0.45%	1.8%	3.6%	7.21%	0.45%
5th Year	*Count*	1	4	8	16	1
	%	0.45%	1.8%	3.6%	7.21%	0.45%
6th Year	*Count*	2	2	14	10	2
	%	0.9%	0.9%	6.31%	4.5%	0.9%
Parents	*Count*	1	2	9	28	2
	%	0.45%	0.9%	4.05%	12.61%	0.9%
Total	*Count*	10	18	60	110	24
	%	4.5%	8.11%	27.03%	49.55%	10.81%

n=222

As illustrated in Table 16, a strong majority of stakeholders (60%) agreed/strongly agreed that assessment is important for an individual's future opportunities. However, it must be observed that, while the majority of stakeholders agreed/strongly agreed with this statement, once again, a consistent cohort of stakeholders disagreed/strongly disagreed, highlighting that stakeholder voice was not consistent on this issue.

However, in relation to the survey statement 'Assessment tells employers how capable I am', while answers were varied, considerable alignment between student and parent perceptions was evident, as outlined in Table 17.

Table 17: Assessment tells an employer how capable I am (or 'my child is' in the parent survey)

Stakeholder Group		*Disagree Strongly*	*Disagree*	*Indifferent*	*Agree*	*Agree Strongly*
Students	*Count*	41	45	41	44	9
	%	23%	25%	23%	24%	5%
Parents	*Count*	9	10	11	10	0
	%	22%	26%	28%	24%	0%
Total	*Count*	50	55	52	54	9
	%	23%	25%	24%	24%	4%

n=220 (180 students and 40 parents)

It is interesting that the proportionality of answers is aligned in relation to what assessment tells an employer.

Implications of the sub-theme for the research questions and theoretical perspective underpinning this research

In relation to the three research questions, this sub-theme (the purpose of assessment and its impact on societal or economic development) provides a further insight, building on reflections in relation to the first sub-theme. With regard to the primary research question, 'What is the perception of post-primary assessment among stakeholders in a case study school in Ireland during a period of simultaneous continuity and reform?', it is clear that a large number of stakeholders believe that assessments function as a mechanism for certifying achievement which will subsequently allow post-primary students to gain access to future societal and educational opportunities. Whereas functionalism is concerned with social order, assessment processes in post-primary school are therefore fulfilling an important function: they are providing students and parents with a mechanism through which opportunities can be accessed and a rationale for why some opportunities may not yet be available to students.

The perceived benefit of assessment certification amongst stakeholders in the case study school is that certification subsequent to assessment will provide future educational and economic opportunity. However, it is interesting, and a potential challenge for post-primary education and assessment in Ireland, that many stakeholders reported that they were indifferent towards or disagreed with the importance of assessment, certification, and current mechanisms for accessing opportunities. Indeed, given the context of continuity and reform of the post-primary system as discussed in Chapters One to Four, this may provide a destabilising impact within post-primary education in the short term.

6.4.3 Theme 1, Sub-theme 3: Accountability within the system

Analysis of the empirical data highlights a third sub-theme within the first theme whereby the purpose of assessment is significant for stakeholders. Indeed, this sub-theme discusses the finding that stakeholders accept assessment data as a means for understanding accountability within the post-primary case study school. In fact, stakeholders perceive

assessment data as a relevant measure of accountability in relation to three areas of evaluation in the case study school:

(i) teacher performance

(ii) school performance

(iii) student performance, including comparison and rank

Each of these three areas will now be explored in relation to this case study analysis of assessment. In addition, implications of the sub-theme for the research questions and the theoretical framework of functionalism underpinning this research will bring this section to a conclusion.

Evaluating teacher performance

Analysis of the focus group data showed that teachers themselves placed great importance on assessment results. Students, for example, noted their perception that teachers feel accountable through assessment data. Students explained that teachers are, as a result, assessment-focused and pressured, in terms of their students' assessment results. This was evident in all focus groups, from First Year to Sixth Year. For example, students noted the following:

> sometimes, the teachers are under pressure.
> 2ndYrStudent1M

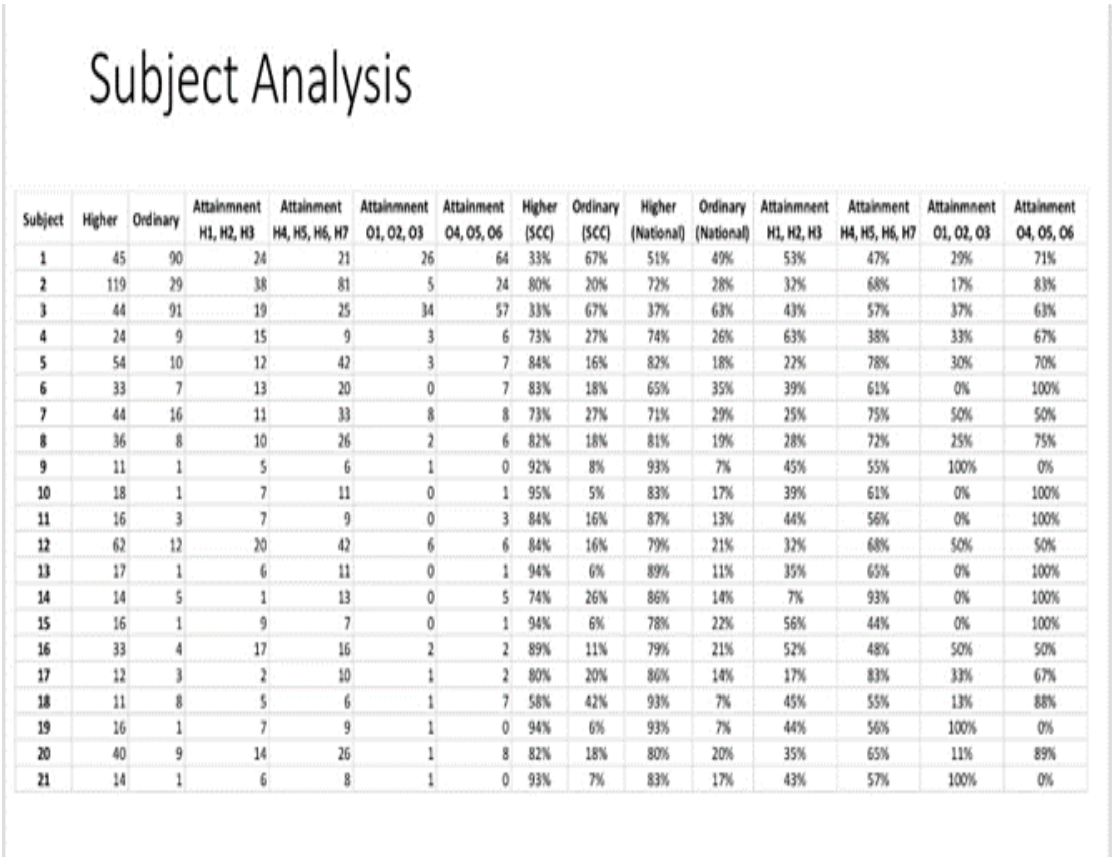
> The first day we came into Fifth Year, my biology teacher sat us down and said, 'Right, now you have to do your Leaving Cert', and then she talked about the Leaving Cert for the whole 40 minutes, and it's all we talked about for the first week.
> 5thYrStudent(noTY)2F

From the student comments above, it is evident that students are aware that teachers place importance on assessment results. This, in turn, impacts the importance that students place on their assessment results and indeed the student experience of teaching and learning:

> [teachers] generally do get angry at you when you don't do particularly good at a test.
> (2ndYrStudent2M)

> they don't really listen when you are like, 'Oh, I couldn't do that homework last night, 'cause I had six other subjects to do as well', and they kind of take it really personally – 'Oh, why is my subject the one you're forgetting about?' – even if it's just for a night […] it's all about their subject.
> (6thYrStudent2F)

Indeed, in reviewing policy documents in the case study school, the importance placed on summative assessment became clear, as, on the first day of each academic year, a staff meeting takes place. During this meeting, senior management in the case study school make a presentation to teaching staff on the outgoing Leaving Certificate results. Teachers are provided by management with a statistical presentation of how each subject department in the case study school compares quantitatively with national figures, as shown in Figure 11, below.



Subject Analysis

Subject	Higher	Ordinary	Attainmnent H1, H2, H3	Attainment H4, H5, H6, H7	Attainmnent O1, O2, O3	Attainment O4, O5, O6	Higher (SCC)	Ordinary (SCC)	Higher (National)	Ordinary (National)	Attainmnent H1, H2, H3	Attainment H4, H5, H6, H7	Attainmnent O1, O2, O3	Attainment O4, O5, O6
1	45	90	24	21	26	64	33%	67%	51%	49%	53%	47%	29%	71%
2	119	29	38	81	5	24	80%	20%	72%	28%	32%	68%	17%	83%
3	44	91	19	25	34	57	33%	67%	37%	63%	43%	57%	37%	63%
4	24	9	15	9	3	6	73%	27%	74%	26%	63%	38%	33%	67%
5	54	10	12	42	3	7	84%	16%	82%	18%	22%	78%	30%	70%
6	33	7	13	20	0	7	83%	18%	65%	35%	39%	61%	0%	100%
7	44	16	11	33	8	8	73%	27%	71%	29%	25%	75%	50%	50%
8	36	8	10	26	2	6	82%	18%	81%	19%	28%	72%	25%	75%
9	11	1	5	6	1	0	92%	8%	93%	7%	45%	55%	100%	0%
10	18	1	7	11	0	1	95%	5%	83%	17%	39%	61%	0%	100%
11	16	3	7	9	0	3	84%	16%	87%	13%	44%	56%	0%	100%
12	62	12	20	42	6	6	84%	16%	79%	21%	32%	68%	50%	50%
13	17	1	6	11	0	1	94%	6%	89%	11%	35%	65%	0%	100%
14	14	5	1	13	0	5	74%	26%	86%	14%	7%	93%	0%	100%
15	16	1	9	7	0	1	94%	6%	78%	22%	56%	44%	0%	100%
16	33	4	17	16	2	2	89%	11%	79%	21%	52%	48%	50%	50%
17	12	3	2	10	1	2	80%	20%	86%	14%	17%	83%	33%	67%
18	11	8	5	6	1	7	58%	42%	93%	7%	45%	55%	13%	88%
19	16	1	7	9	1	0	94%	6%	93%	7%	44%	56%	100%	0%
20	40	9	14	26	1	8	82%	18%	80%	20%	35%	65%	11%	89%
21	14	1	6	8	1	0	93%	7%	83%	17%	43%	57%	100%	0%

Figure 11: PowerPoint slide from management presentation to all teaching staff on Leaving Certificate assessment data analysis

(Source: Case Study School Management, 2018)

Figure 11 shows a summative analysis of each Leaving Certificate subject in the school. Subjects are not named in this slide; the first column shows that each subject is anonymised and represented with a numerical value. However, details such as the number of students taking the subject at higher and ordinary level are provided, and this detracts

from the anonymity of the data. For example, core subjects taken by all students can be identified. In addition, minority subjects, or subjects traditionally taken by smaller numbers of students, can also be identified. Through this slide, all subjects undertaken by outgoing students are compared with corresponding national averages for each subject. This analysis, and presentation of this analysis to staff on the first day of the new academic term, highlights the importance of summative results for the case study school. This topic arose during the focus group with teachers, who noted that they perceived summative assessment data as significant in terms of their own professional accountability:

> The summative assessment at the end is the be-all and end-all. (Teacher1)

> Teachers see it as a reflection of their teaching and of them. (Teacher6)

Upon reflection on the empirical data, it is clear that students are valid in their observations that teachers feel pressurised in relation to summative assessment results. However, the importance of summative assessment results is not limited to the local case study school. The Director of Assessment (NCCA) observed that changes to assessment on a national level are perceived by teachers in terms of the impact it will have on the summative results.

(i) Evaluating school performance

As discussed, Figure 11 provides an insight into the importance placed on summative data by school management. Summative assessment data from the local case study school is summarised, analysed in relation to national standards and presented to the entire staff on the first day of the new academic term. Hence, it is proposed that assessment data is utilised for accountability by management within the case study school. The empirical data collected in this research also indicates that stakeholders perceive assessment results as an indicative measure of how well schools are doing, as presented in Table 18.

Table 18: Assessment results provide information on how well schools are doing (by stakeholder group)

Stakeholder Group		*Disagree Strongly*	*Disagree*	*Indifferent*	*Agree*	*Agree Strongly*
1st Year	*Count*	4	3	8	15	0
	%	1.77%	1.33%	3.54%	6.64%	0%
2nd Year	*Count*	3	7	5	11	4
	%	1.33%	3.1%	2.21%	4.87%	1.77%
3rd Year	*Count*	3	9	4	12	2
	%	1.33%	3.98%	1.77%	5.31%	0.88%
4th Year	*Count*	0	8	3	17	2
	%	0%	3.54%	1.33%	7.52%	0.88%
5th Year	*Count*	4	7	4	11	4
	%	1.77%	3.1%	1.77%	4.87%	1.77%
6th Year	*Count*	6	10	4	6	4
	%	2.65%	4.42%	1.77%	2.65%	1.77%
Parents	*Count*	2	9	10	23	2
	%	0.88%	3.98%	4.42%	10.18%	0.88%
Total	*Count*	22	53	38	95	18
	%	9.73%	23.45%	16.81%	42.04%	7.96%

n=226 (180 students and 46 parents)

As illustrated in Table 18, 50% of stakeholders agreed or strongly agreed that assessment data provides information on how schools are doing. The results are generally consistent across all sampled groups, with the exception of Sixth Year students. A higher proportion of Sixth-Year students, when compared with other student groups, indicated that they disagreed, as portrayed in Table 18, above. This is an interesting finding, as 6th-Year students undertake the assessment which is utilised by senior management for the purpose of preparing the summative slide for the first day of the academic term each year.

Evaluate student performance

As discussed in the literature review, the Department of Education and Skills, through the Inspectorate, is encouraging the use of assessment as baseline data to set goals and plot a trajectory for students within the post-primary education system (DES, 2015d, 2016e, 2018d, 2018e, 2018f). This system is adhered to in the case study school. When asked in the survey if stakeholders would like teachers to have such a system in place, they responded as depicted in Table 19:

Table 19: Goal setting by teachers using past assessments would be helpful (by stakeholder group)

Stakeholder Group		*Disagree Strongly*	*Disagree*	*Indifferent*	*Agree*	*Agree Strongly*
1st Year	*Count*	1	2	2	18	7
	%	0.45%	0.9%	0.9%	8.18%	3.18%
2nd Year	*Count*	0	1	11	9	9
	%	0%	0.45%	5%	4.09%	4.09%
3rd Year	*Count*	1	12	8	8	1
	%	0.45%	5.45%	3.64%	3.64%	0.45%
4th Year	*Count*	0	1	5	18	6
	%	0%	0.45%	2.27%	8.15%	2.72%
5th Year	*Count*	5	2	5	17	1
	%	2.27%	0.9%	2.27%	7.73%	0.45%
	Count	2	1	5	17	5
6th Year	*%*	0.9%	0.45%	2.27%	7.73%	2.27%
	Count	1	2	7	28	2
Parents	*%*	0.45%	0.9%	3.18%	12.72%	0.9%
	Count	10	21	43	115	31
Total	*%*	4.54%	9.55%	19.55%	52.27%	14.09%

n=220 (180 students and 40 parents)

Table 19, above, highlights that a large proportion of stakeholders strongly agreed (14%) or agreed (52%) that goal setting by teachers using baseline data from past exams would be helpful. Contrastingly, however, when asked about the extent to which stakeholders agreed with the statement 'Assessment results predict my future results', alternate results arose, as shown in Table 20. This survey question did not highlight any specific past assessment. Rather, stakeholders were asked the question in relation to post-primary assessments generally.

Table 20: Assessment results predict my future results (by stakeholder group)

Stakeholder Group		*Disagree Strongly*	*Disagree*	*Indifferent*	*Agree*	*Agree Strongly*
Students	*Count*	41	77	31	29	2
	%	23%	43%	17%	16%	1%
Parents	*Count*	4	12	5	23	2
	%	9%	26%	11%	50%	4%
	Count	45	89	36	52	4
Total	*%*	20%	39%	16%	23%	2%

n=226 (180 students and 46 parents)

From Table 20, it is clear that the opinions of students and parents are not aligned with regard to the statement 'Assessment results predict my future results'. The majority of parents (54%, n=46) agreed that assessment results predict future results, while the

majority of students (66%, n=180) disagreed. This is interesting, as it marks the first occasion where student and parent responses were not in agreement.

In the survey, stakeholders were also asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement 'Assessment helps teachers track student progress.' Student answers are presented in Table 21, below.

Table 21: Assessment helps teachers track student progress (student responses)

Stakeholder Group		***Disagree Strongly***	***Disagree***	***Indifferent***	***Agree***	***Agree Strongly***
Students	*Count*	2	7	29	117	25
	%	1%	4%	16%	65%	14%

n=180

As illustrated in Table 21, 79% of students agree/strongly agree that assessment results help teachers track student progress. This builds on the first sub-theme within Theme 1 (assessment supports individual development) and indicates that, while students did not agree that assessment results predict future results (Table 20), students did agree that assessment helps teachers to track student progress.

Empirical data gathered in the focus group shows that students endorse the use of assessment data as baseline data for the purpose of tracking goals over time in terms of additional motivation.

> I think it kind of makes you perform a bit better, because teachers know what you're capable of […] they can keep track of you better.
> 6thYrStudent2F

> It's nice for the teacher to have an idea of where you're at and, like, set your standard.
> (TYStudent1f)

These comments on behalf of students indicate that tracking of students over time, and the setting an individual 'standard', would be beneficial for their learning and attainment; they 'perform a bit better'. Hence, again building on the first sub-theme (assessment for the purpose of individual development), it is clear that student accountability is linked, through summative assessment, with individual student development.

Teachers explained that they perceived baseline assessment data in the same way as students:

> it also allowed me to see that she wasn't achieving to her ability; what could I do?
> (Teacher3)

Teachers in the case study school perceive summative data as a tool for setting expectations about a student, and they can reflect and act on data that is not in line with their expectations. Teachers viewed this use of baseline data as useful and important.

While many students expressed the perception that this use of baseline data was positive in terms of student accountability, other students indicated a level of awareness of the negative impact of using baseline data as a tool for tracking and setting goals. These students were wary of teachers making long-term judgements about their capabilities.

> It's not really fair to be expecting students to get the same over and over, because they could, like, be going through stuff out of school as well, like, that might interrupt their learning.
> (1stYrStudent3M)

> Why should one thing you did when you were younger show your potential when you're 18?
> (5thYrStudent(noTY)2F)

In discussing this issue in the focus groups, students of all ages and year groups expressed concern at the use of baseline data to measure progress throughout post-primary education. In addition, students questioned the reliability and trustworthiness of the data and the process of goal setting:

> if they can set realistic goals that they know we could meet and that I know I could meet, then I'd be open for it, but I don't think they actually could.
> (2ndYrStudent2M)

This insight into what is considered 'realistic' by a Second-Year student is highly interesting and demonstrates the depth of thinking and clear insight of certain students regarding the processes behind assessment. In order to address this concern, the setting of 'realistic goals', Table 22 illustrates student responses to the statement 'Assessment results are not always accurate'.

Table 22: Assessment results are not always accurate (by year group)

Stakeholder Group		*Disagree Strongly*	*Disagree*	*Indifferent*	*Agree*	*Agree Strongly*
1st Year	*Count*	3	7	14	5	1
	%	1.67%	3.89%	7.78%	2.78%	0.56%
2nd Year	*Count*	0	4	13	11	2
	%	0%	2.22%	7.22%	6.11%	1.11%
3rd Year	*Count*	0	6	6	15	3
	%	0%	3.33%	3.33%	8.33%	1.67%
4th Year	*Count*	1	6	12	9	2
	%	0.56%	3.33%	6.67%	5%	1.11%
5th Year	*Count*	2	0	26	1	1
	%	1.11%	0%	14.44%	0.56%	0.56%
6th Year	*Count*	3	3	22	0	2
	%	1.67%	1.67%	12.22%	0%	1.11%
Total	*Count*	9	26	93	41	11
	%	5%	14.44%	51.67%	22.78%	6.11%

n=180

Table 22 provides further insight into the important question raised by the Second-Year student: can realistic goals be set? Analysis of the survey data above demonstrates that, while a cohort of students perceived assessment results to be accurate, the majority of students (52%) were indifferent in their opinion. This may demonstrate doubt on behalf of students, echoing the concern of the Second-Year student.

Parents in the case study school shared the concerns of students in terms of the reliability and validity of the variety of assessments that take place in post-primary school. For example, one parent noted the following:

> I'd like to know more about the basis of assessment for some of those.
> (Parent4)

Overall, the teachers and a cohort of students were in favour of utilising assessment data for the purpose of setting targets and tracking students over time. This group of stakeholders linked this accountability of students over the six years of post-primary education with enhanced individual development. However, a group of students and parents were unsure, and asked questions regarding the system of assessment.

In order to further understand the relationship between post-primary assessment data points, statistical analysis was undertaken for one class group (the class of 2018) as they journeyed through post-primary education. In order to understand the relationship

between the assessment data obtained at the entrance exam stage (through the CAT4 assessment), the CAT4 results were compared with all subsequent local and state assessment. This information is provided in Table 23, below, in reverse chronological order. For each post-primary assessment, the CAT4 verbal reasoning score is correlated with the score for English and Irish. In addition, the CAT4 numerical reasoning score is correlated with the score for maths (n=138).

Table 23: The correlation between CAT4 entrance assessment and all subsequent post-primary assessment for the class of 2018 (n=138)[2]

Assessment	English and CAT4 Verbal Reasoning (Correlation Coefficient)	English and CAT4 Verbal Reasoning *p*-value	Irish and CAT4 Verbal Reasoning (Correlation Coefficient)	Irish and CAT4 Verbal Reasoning *p*-value	Maths and CAT4 Numerical Reasoning (Correlation Coefficient)	Maths and CAT4 Numerical Reasoning *p*-value
Leaving Certificate	0.21	0.013*	0.14	0.101	0.32	0.000*
Leaving Certificate Mock	0.50	0.000*	0.40	0.000*	0.58	0.000*
Sixth Year Christmas	0.59	0.000*	0.30	0.000*	0.56	0.000*
Fifth Year Summer	0.60	0.000*	0.37	0.000*	0.50	0.000*
Fifth Year February	0.60	0.000*	0.46	0.000*	0.55	0.000*
Fifth Year Christmas	0.46	0.000*	0.38	0.000*	0.59	0.000*
Junior Certificate	0.58	0.000*	0.50	0.000*	0.68	0.000*
Junior Cert Mocks	0.50	0.000*	0.49	0.000*	0.70	0.000*
JC Christmas	0.57	0.000*	0.51	0.000*	0.57	0.000*
Second Year Summer	0.62	0.000*	0.62	0.000*	0.56	0.000*
Second Year Christmas	0.55	0.000*	0.49	0.000*	0.62	0.000*
First Year Summer	0.59	0.000*	0.58	0.000*	0.64	0.000*
First Year February	0.64	0.000*	0.34	0.000*	0.69	0.000*
First Year Christmas	0.55	0.000*	0.52	0.000*	0.74	0.000*

From Table 23, the following observations can be made:

[2] Items with a *p*-value of less than 0.05 are significantly different. Significant items are marked with a *. Correlation among the variables are evaluated using the Pearson correlation coefficient. Please see Appendix H for more information.

The overall English and verbal reasoning correlation is $0.21 \leq r \leq 0.64$.

The overall Irish and verbal reasoning correlation is $0.14 \leq r \leq 0.62$.

The overall maths and numerical reasoning correlation is $0.32 \leq r \leq 0.74$.

It is noted that all correlations are positive. However, the correlations vary significantly. This data raises a number of questions, such as the following:

- Why is there such variation amongst correlations?
- Why are the Junior Certificate/Cycle correlations so different from the Leaving Certificate?
- Why is there such variation between English and Irish if both are compared with verbal reasoning (e.g. 1st-Year February assessment)?

These questions and the statistical findings will be discussed in greater detail in relation to recommendations to national policymakers in Chapter Seven. In general, assessment data from the case study school indicates a low to moderate positive correlation between the CAT4 assessment and subsequent post-primary assessments. However, many of the correlations are inconsistent. This indicates that the concerns of stakeholders who question the reliability and validity of the process of tracking student grades over six years of post-primary education in the case study school are correct and important.

Irrespective of the concerns of validity and reliability in relation to assessment data for the purpose of accountability amongst the general cohort as discussed above, further analysis of the empirical data indicates that stakeholders perceive summative assessments (the local and state assessments listed in Section 2.2.6) as particularly important, as they provide information on the relative standard of individuals within the group. The summative assessment result is therefore perceived as a tool that assists with regard to accountability for relative student attainment and success, which is desirable according to stakeholders. For example, students explained that they were very interested to know their academic position relative to their peer group:

> if I get, like, a 70, then I'm not doing well; like […] you have to kind of be at the same level as other people.
> (1stYrStudent3F)

> There's loads of competition […] people are trying to be competitive […] like, best at everything.
> (3rdYrStudent3M)

Teachers indicated that they were aware that students were interested in this type of summative relativity:

> After spending four weeks doing a CBA, they see more value; they are asking more about the summer exam more so than the CBA, as they are 'only going to get a descriptor', as they say, and they ask, 'What's going to be on our summer test? […] They are very, you know, 'I want my result, my percentage'.
> (Teacher6)

This teacher noted that her class spent four weeks of term preparing for and orchestrating the CBA, and she commented that students prefer to focus on the summative summer assessment, as it provides a summative score, rather than the descriptor provided in the CBA. This summative approach to assessment results was flagged as undesirable by the Director of Assessment (NCCA). In the interview with the director, he explained that learning within the current structure of the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate can be quantified or summated within a limited range. Therefore, if a particular standard is reached by a student, he/she perceives him/herself to be successful in his/her learning. Students who achieved top grades such as 100% considered themselves to have reached their quota of learning:

> An A+ student in the present system: I'm sitting back with a cigarette; I'm done; job done [...] what really counts in terms of how you can improve.
> (Director of Assessment, NCCA):

The NCCA director believed that there is no ceiling where student learning is concerned. The job is never 'done'. As a result, the NCCA is reviewing the summative grading system, he explained. The purpose of this review is to reduce the importance of quantitative and summative assessment. This is interesting where the purpose of assessment is considered. As outlined in this section, all stakeholders place tremendous importance on summative assessment, as discussed.

The NCCA's newly introduced Junior Cycle 'descriptor' grading system is a new approach to the grading and certification of students. It is hoped that students would perceive their own continuous formative development as the main focus, rather than focusing exclusively on their grade. This is exceptionally interesting in relation to reform and continuity of assessment in the Irish post-primary system. This will be a significant change in the culture of assessment for stakeholders, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Purpose, accountability, and this research

This section addressed the third sub-theme identified within Theme 1: the purpose of assessment is connected to accountability within the post-primary education system. This section addressed teacher performance, school performance and student performance in relation to this sub-theme, providing many points of reflection relating to the research questions.

In relation to the primary research question, 'What is the perception of post-primary assessment among stakeholders in a case study school in Ireland during a period of simultaneous continuity and reform?', there is a clear indication that summative assessment data, which is dominant in the current system, is perceived as important by the majority of stakeholders. While there are different opinions amongst and within groups of stakeholders, many students, teachers, and parents perceive assessment data as providing a clear indication of teacher performance, school performance and student performance. This is interesting in relation to system reform, as a move away from summative assessment data is emerging.

In relation to the benefits of assessment within the case study school, stakeholders are clear, as noted, that standards can be measured. This is considered a benefit by many stakeholders. However, other stakeholders observed that accurate, reliable, and valid use of assessment data is a significant challenge, and the use of assessment data for this purpose was challenged.

Where functionalism is concerned, this sub-theme is very interesting. It is clear that assessment currently fulfils a purpose within the case study school: it measures and evaluates performance. However, reform of the Junior Cycle is a clear change within the system of education and assessment and will impact on the processes of accountability. As regards the empirical data, stakeholders have not yet been impacted by the change to the Junior Cycle, and they did not observe any change to accountability within the system at the time during which this research was conducted. Once reform has occurred and a new system is established at both Junior and Senior Cycle levels, it will be interesting to review the data with regard to systematic accountability.

6.4.4 Theme 1, Sub-theme 4: Anti-purpose

The fourth sub-theme identified within Theme One is that of the 'anti-purpose' of assessment. This relates to the challenges perceived by stakeholders in terms of assessment, where stakeholders note assessment has no purpose. Indeed, analysis of the data highlighted two main elements which, in the view of stakeholders, undermined the importance of assessment in post-primary schools:

(i) The homogeneity of post-primary assessment

(ii) Learning in the absence of assessment

These two elements will be explored in this section prior to reflecting on the research questions and the theoretical lens of functionalism as applied to this part of the research.

The homogeneity of assessment

The empirical data showed that stakeholders in the case study school held negative opinions towards certain features of assessment, including the perceived lack of fairness and equality in the range of assessments available. For example, the survey instrument asked students about the extent to which they agreed that 'assessment is unfair to students.' Table 24 illustrates student and parent responses.

Table 24: Assessment is unfair to students (by stakeholder group)

Stakeholder		***Disagree Strongly***	***Disagree***	***Indifferent***	***Agree***	***Agree Strongly***
Students	*Count*	0	56	59	43	22
	%	0%	31%	33%	24%	12%
Parents	*Count*	5	32	8	0	0
	%	11%	71%	18%	0%	0%
	Count	5	88	67	43	22
Total	*%*	2%	39%	30%	19%	10%

n=225 (180 students and 45 parents)

Table 24 clearly shows polarity between the perspectives of students and parents on this issue. 36% of students (n=180) perceived assessment to be unfair to students, while 82% of parents (n=45) disagreed. This is a second issue where student and parent perceptions are misaligned within the case study school. A second survey question added perspective to a similar assessment issue. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with regard to the statement that students who do badly in assessment only have

themselves to blame. Table 25 displays the empirical data in relation to that survey statement.

Table 25: Students who do badly in assessments only have themselves to blame (by stakeholder group)

Stakeholder Group		***Disagree Strongly***	***Disagree***	***Indifferent***	***Agree***	***Agree Strongly***
Students	*Count*	2	135	0	32	11
	%	1%	75%	0%	18%	6%
Parents	*Count*	2	35	0	3	0
	%	4%	89%	0%	7%	0%
Total	*Count*	4	170	0	35	11
	%	2%	77%	0%	16%	5%

n=220 (180 students and 40 parents)

As depicted in Table 25, a strong and more consistent reaction from students (n=180) and parents (n=40) was evoked by this statement. This shows that, although students and parents disagree in relation to the 'fairness' of assessment, there is general and proportionate agreement with regard to students who do badly in assessment, to the effect that 'they do not have only themselves to blame'. The empirical data gathered in this research adds to this picture and provides an insight into the additional factors which may influence a student's performance in assessment. In particular, the homogeneity of assessment was frequently referenced. One parent commented at the end of the survey on the homogeneity of the education system:

> I would like to see the education system cater better for a broader spectrum of individuals.
> (Anonymous parent)

In addition, the same issue also emerged during the focus group discussions. Students explained that the homogenous content of assessment in the current system is limiting.

> They need to be focused more on you and your individual skills. Like, that would be fairer […] but they don't focus on that.
> (3rdYrStudent2F)

> you can't make a goldfish climb a tree, and I feel like that's kind of what the school system is trying to make us do.
> (2ndYrStudent2M)

This Second-Year student provided the analogy of a goldfish trying to climb a tree in order to demonstrate that different students have an array of different abilities, and that expecting all students to conform in order to fit the education system is limiting for all

students. An assessment that asks a goldfish to climb a tree is akin to asking certain students to perform in the subjects offered within the post-primary system, and consequently, students who cannot perform not only have themselves, but also the system of assessment, to blame. Frustration at the lack of creativity within a system of assessment that rewards the regurgitation of learned content was expressed in all focus groups, including students at the Junior Cycle stage. This is interesting given that contemporary reform is situated within the Junior Cycle system:

> our creativity and our mind, and what we can really do with it. I don't feel like they really try to unlock that in here […] you're confined in that classroom; you learn what they want you to learn, and you spit it back out in a test.
> (2ndYrStudent2M)

> it's a memory test rather than what your ability is.
> (6thYrStudent2F)

Hence, it is indicated by students in both the Junior and Senior Cycles that memory is prioritised over creativity. This is interesting given contemporary government policy which has reformed the Junior Cycle curriculum and assessment. Indeed, according to the Director of Assessment in the National Centre for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the NCCA is aware of and actively reflecting on how to change this:

> If we are going to move towards a curriculum which is developing 21st Century skills, those skills can't be examined or tested in an exam hall. We've got to find other ways of assessing that.
> (Director of Assessment, NCCA)

While the NCCA pursues methods of assessment outside 'the exam hall', students explain their approach to current assessments that take place in this context. Indeed, assessments that take place outside the exam hall are perceived as exploitative by students. For example, in relation to oral assessments, final-year students admitted in the focus group that they manipulate their answers to adhere to the anticipated marking scheme, with a view to maximising their potential marks. Similarly, regarding the write-up portion of a practical exam (e.g. the cooking test in home economics), which is created to develop students' reflective thinking and practical skills, Sixth-Year students observed during the focus group that they carefully analyse the assessment marking scheme and manipulate their answers to again access maximum marks, rather than reporting their true experience:

> you can just lie about what you kinda did [...] so the examiner will give you more marks.
> (6thYrStudent2F)

Hence, it is clear that, while homogeneity within assessment is perceived as problematic by students, the summative nature of assessment is also problematic, as students adjust their answers to adhere to the marking scheme. This is a problem for assessment, and it provides an 'anti-purpose' where post-primary education is concerned.

A second area where the anti-purpose of assessment emerged is that of the learning that takes place in the absence of assessment. This was referred to briefly in Section 6.4 in relation to individual development, and it is addressed further below.

Learning in the absence of assessment

In relation to learning, it also emerged that stakeholders perceive that important and interesting learning which takes place in post-primary school within subjects and other areas is not currently assessed:

1) Non-assessed subjects: the contribution and importance of subjects such as SPHE was referenced frequently in the student focus groups.

2) Transition Year: As discussed in Section 6.4, Transition Year was repeatedly identified as a year without significant assessment and was therefore respected as a year of significant personal development and learning.

3) Extra-curricular activities: A number of optional activities, such as physical education (PE), outside of structured classes, are also perceived as important by stakeholders.

In addition to explaining the importance of subjects which are not assessed, parents, in particular, noted an absence of feedback on the holistic development of their children.

> never mind the academics; we need more assessment on how children are doing. More contact on that level, I think, would be very important.
> (Parent2)

> I would love the opportunity […] to have a conversation with somebody who has seen my child in the school and who has kind of assessed in some ways, other than her academic strengths and weaknesses, in other areas she could develop.
> (Parent4)

From the above, it is clear that while summative accountability in relation to academic performance is important for stakeholders, as addressed in Section 6.4, other avenues for learning and other, more holistic, concerns, exist for stakeholders within the post-primary case study school. This will be addressed further in relation to Transition Year in Section 6.6.1

Implications of the sub-theme for the research questions and the theoretical framework of functionalism underpinning this research

This section has addressed 'anti-purpose' as the fourth and final sub-theme of Theme 1, the purpose of assessment. Stakeholders perceive that assessment does not always fulfil its purpose. Homogeneity within the established system is identified as problematic by students and parents who also note that important learning and student development take place for the very reason that there is an absence of assessment. It is interesting that Junior Cycle students also noted these concerns, indicating that perhaps Junior Cycle curriculum and assessment reform may be problematic. Indeed, through a functionalist lens, it is apparent that Junior Cycle reform may have occurred in response to stakeholder voice on the anti-purpose of assessment. This will be addressed in relation to Theme 2 and the culture of assessment.

6.4.5 Theme 1 conclusion: Stakeholders perceive assessment through purpose

This section outlined empirical data in relation to Theme One: stakeholders perceive assessment in relation to its purpose. As discussed in the introduction, thematic analysis was used to organise the qualitative data. Each of the four sub-themes identified in relation to Theme One was outlined and discussed with supporting evidence from the empirical data. In concluding this section and the presentation of findings for Theme One, it is noted that the vision of the purpose of assessment was described by the Director of Assessment (NCCA):

> everything that we do should be through the lens of how it supports learning, and that includes assessment.
> (Director of Assessment, NCCA)

This is important for the primary research question: 'What is the perception of post-primary assessment among stakeholders in a case study school in Ireland during a period of simultaneous continuity and reform?' Assessment within the post-primary education system in Ireland is understood by stakeholders to:

- support individual development
- enable access to wider educational, societal, and economic opportunities
- provide accountability (for schools, teachers, and students themselves) within the post-primary system

However, it is also concluded that

- the current system of assessment is perceived by a proportion of stakeholders as limiting for students. A proportion of stakeholders perceive assessment as unfair.
- assessment is homogeneous at the current time, and it would benefit from a review, with diversity of skill sets prioritised.
- current differentiation in the assessment system can be manipulated by students in order to heighten their summative assessment grade.
- learning takes place in the absence of assessment; therefore, assessment is not vital for learning.

From these summary points, it is clear that assessment plays a functional role in terms of systematic and individual accountability, subsequent to which opportunities and status become available. Simultaneously, unrest is evident within the system of post-primary assessment, which is a challenge where education is concerned. This unrest may result in disequilibrium in the system, and policymakers are challenged by some elements of desired continuity (the motivating and accountability factors provided by assessment) and others which require reform (the homogeneity, limitations, and unfairness within the system).

Data emerging under the first theme (stakeholders perceive assessment through purpose) is comprehensive. In line with the final comment from the Director of Assessment (NCCA), the observations and findings from Theme One are interwoven into Theme Two (stakeholders perceive assessment through culture) and Theme Three (stakeholders

perceive post-primary assessment has an impact on student wellbeing), wherein the topics of continuity and reform are more evident.

6.5 Theme Two: Stakeholders perceive assessment through the culture of assessment

This section presents the empirical data gathered in this research in relation to the second identified theme: stakeholders perceive assessment through the culture of assessment. Indeed, thematic analysis of the qualitative data highlighted a culture of simultaneous continuity and reform within the case study school. The national and the local assessment culture permeates the perspectives of stakeholders. This will be discussed through exploration of particular issues with regard to continuity and reform within the system. Firstly, empirical data relating to national (state) assessments and local (school) assessments will be presented. The identified issue of overassessment as perceived by stakeholders will then be discussed in relation to these national and state assessments. The role of the teacher and the role of local assessment policy will then be discussed in relation to the creation of assessment culture in the case study school. Finally, the culture of assessment is discussed in relation to the purpose of assessment (as identified in Theme One), whereby reform within the system of assessment is problematic, from the perspectives of stakeholders, due to the purpose of the Leaving Certificate in particular. In order to conclude the section on Theme Two, an overview of the empirical data relating to the theme is discussed with regard to the research questions and the theoretical perspective of functionalism.

6.5.1 Continuity and reform: The culture of national (state) assessments

This section presents the empirical data gathered in this research which directly relates to stakeholder perceptions of the culture of national or state assessments. As discussed in Chapter Four, state assessments include a number of elements and programmes. However, in the semi-structured student and parent focus groups, students primarily discussed their experience of national assessments with reference to two particular assessments:

- Junior Cycle classroom-based assessments (CBAs)
- the Leaving Certificate

Other national assessments, such as the Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), did not emerge for discussion during any focus groups.

The Junior Cycle CBAs are firstly discussed in relation to the empirical data collected in this research. The Leaving Certificate assessment will then be explored. In addition, statistical analysis regarding the LCVP, as requested by school management, will be presented, and discussed in this section in relation to the culture of assessment in the case study post-primary school.

Junior Cycle classroom-based assessments (CBAs)

As discussed in Chapter Four, the CBAs are a relatively new addition to state assessment in Ireland, and were introduced on an incremental, subject-by-subject basis, from 2014. As a result, students of different year groups within the case study school experienced different levels of exposure to the CBAs, as they began their journey through post-primary school at different annual intervals. For example, a cohort of 6th-Year students (those who completed TY) began their post-primary schooling in 2013 and will not have experienced the CBAs at all. In addition, the First-Year cohort had not undertaken any CBAs at the time of data collection, as CBAs occur during 2nd and 3rd Years. Conversely, the 2nd-Year cohort had undertaken CBAs in almost all of their Junior Cycle subjects at the time of data collection. As discussed in relation to Theme One, thematic analysis provides the structure through which all data was analysed. However, in line with the pragmatic methodological approach of the researcher, the survey data is firstly introduced with regard to this issue, as it provides an initial context. The focus group data will then be discussed, as it provides an insight into the reasoning behind the survey data. In the survey, stakeholders were asked about the extent to which they agreed/disagreed that the CBAs were a student-friendly addition to assessment. The results from the survey data are illustrated in Table 26. As noted above, student answers from 6th Year and 1st Year were not included in the creation of this figure due to their lack of direct experience of the assessment.

Table 26: 'The CBA is a student-friendly addition to assessment' (by stakeholder group)

Stakeholder Group		***Disagree Strongly***	***Disagree***	***Indifferent***	***Agree***	***Agree Strongly***
Students	*Count*	15	23	28	36	17
	%	13%	19%	24%	30%	14%
Parents	*Count*	2	3	13	21	6
	%	4%	7%	29%	47%	13%
Total	*Count*	17	26	41	57	23
	%	10%	16%	25%	35%	14%

n=164 (119 students and 45 parents)

As presented in Table 26, 44% of all students (from 2nd to 5th Years) and 60% of parents agreed/strongly agreed that the CBA is a student-friendly addition to assessment. During the focus groups, stakeholders explained that CBAs are beneficial and student-friendly, primarily as they focus on the development of a variety of skills. For example, stakeholders noted that CBAs provide an opportunity for group work, research, and creativity. Stakeholders explained that this utilisation and showcasing of a broad variety of skills enhance the learning experience:

> With CBAs, it's all about research […] with CBAs, you have to research things, and you get to, like, to learn new things.
> (2ndYrStudent1M)

> You do your own research, put together your own presentation, and you put it out.
> (2ndYrStudent2M)

> I think you get more out of the child.
> (Parent1)

Hence, it is clear that students perceive a benefit to this type of assessment, in that they can implement their own individual approach to researching the assessment content, while parents perceived that greater learning results from this type of approach. Thus, it is clear that a cohort of stakeholders perceived the benefits of the reformed approach to assessment when compared with the traditional Junior Certificate.

However, returning to the quantitative research and Table 26, above, it is interesting that a majority of 56% of students and a strong cohort of 40% of parents who answered the survey question where 'neutral' towards CBAs or disagreed/strongly disagreed that they

are a student-friendly addition. This indicates that a large proportion are indifferent or in opposition to the student-friendliness of the assessment. Empirical data from the focus groups contributes to understanding the perspectives of these stakeholders, and it is evident that the local culture of assessment impacts on perspective. Stakeholders noted problems and challenges within the CBAs which detracted from their CBA experience in the local case study school. For example, the practice, and therefore the culture, of the CBAs is reported by stakeholders to be inconsistent in terms of classroom management and general motivation:

> we didn't really do it
> (TYStudent2f)

> They're a waste […] I hate them so much […] I think the whole thing is a bit airy […] I didn't feel much drive to do that well in them.
> (3rdYrStudent1M)

By contrast to this relaxed, informal, or 'airy' culture experienced by some students, others disclosed that they experienced high levels of pressure and stress during the CBA assessment, which also detracted from the learning experience.

> you're worried that you forget what you're going to say, and you just can't remember, and then you'll, like, stress about it.
> (2ndYrStudent2F)

> it was so much stress to, like, go home and finish the CBA, which is a lot of work.
> (3rdYrStudent2F)

> I have just gone through the CBAs now with Junior Cert, and I think we are hating it.
> (Parent5)

> our family would be very cynical about the value of CBAs at this stage […] we would say that the amount of work is disproportionate to the benefit […] it is absolutely disproportionate to what ends up being a comment on the certificate at the end of the day.
> (Parent4)

> Some children were having panic attacks.
> (Parent4)

With regard to the emotional state of students approaching the CBA, the survey data adds further to the qualitative data on this issue. Stakeholders were asked about how the CBA made them feel, and they were provided with three response options, as illustrated in Table 27. As expected, of the 180 students who completed the survey (students from First Year to Sixth Year), 120 of these students directly participated in CBAs and reported on their level of 'nervousness' towards the CBAs. The observations of parents about their children's approach to the CBA are also illustrated in this table.

Table 27: Student responses to the statement 'The CBA made me feel […]'.

Stakeholder Group		***Extremely Nervous***	***A little Nervous***	***Not at All Nervous***
Students	*Count*	20	60	37
	%	17%	51%	32%
Parents	*Count*	2	27	12
	%	5%	66%	29%
Total	*Count*	22	87	49
	%	14%	55%	31%

n=158 (117 students and 41 parents)

It is noteworthy that student and parent responses generally aligned in relation to this statement. However, a greater number of students reported that they felt 'extremely nervous' than was recognised by parents in relation to their own children. This is interesting, as it may indicate that parents do not always perceive the correct level of student emotion or 'nervousness' of their child in relation to this state assessment. Remarkably, the Director of Assessment in the NCCA noted that stress or nervousness may be an issue in some schools, However, he was clear about the philosophy behind the policy directing the emerging culture of this assessment:

> I know in some places there may be, it can be a lot, overpreparation for it. But there shouldn't; it should be part of the ebb and flow of classroom practice.
> (Director of Assessment, NCCA)

Hence, it is possible within the case study school that there may be an issue where the local school culture is concerned. Students disclosed they are not experiencing the CBA assessment as part of the 'ebb and flow' of the class; rather, some students are over-focused on the assessment, and other students report an absence of a clear direction.

Hence, with regard to the CBA and reform within post-primary education, it is clear that stakeholders are not consistent in their perspectives. Stakeholders disclosed that reform is inconsistent, which evokes a number of varied experiences, and therefore perspectives.

This will be discussed in Section 6.5.6 in relation to the impact of reform amidst continuity.

Leaving Certificate

In relation to the second state assessment which was constantly referred to in the focus groups, it was clear that the 'importance' of the Leaving Certificate was ingrained in all students, irrespective of their year group:

> it's the most important test you'll ever do in your life.
> (1stYrStudent3F)

> the school system in Ireland, has made it so the Leaving Cert is that big point, because there's not many opportunities outside it.
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)2M)

The survey data showed that a large proportion of stakeholders, from every group (including Junior Cycle students and parents in general), experienced 'nervousness' about the Leaving Certificate, as illustrated in Table 28.

Table 28: Student and parent responses to the statement 'When I think of the Leaving Certificate, I feel [...]' (by stakeholder group)

Stakeholder Group		*Extremely Nervous*	*A Little Nervous*	*Not at All Nervous*
1st Year	*Count*	22	5	0
	%	81%	19%	0%
2nd Year	*Count*	17	11	2
	%	57%	37%	6%
3rd Year	*Count*	14	11	5
	%	46%	37%	17%
4th Year	*Count*	18	11	0
	%	62%	38%	0%
5th Year	*Count*	20	9	1
	%	67%	30%	3%
6th Year	*Count*	21	9	0
	%	70%	30%	0%
Parents	*Count*	19	26	1
	%	41%	57%	2%
Total	*Count*	131	82	9
	%	59%	37%	4%

n=222 in total (176 students and 46 parents)

As depicted in Table 28, 59% of all stakeholders indicated that they felt 'extremely nervous' when thinking about the Leaving Certificate. It must be emphasised that this feeling was not limited to Senior Cycle students who were approaching the assessment. Rather, large proportions of students and parents in all year groups reported experiencing these feelings. For example, the responses from First-Year students are proportionate to those from Sixth-Year students. In order to illustrate this proportionality, the survey results from these two groups are displayed in Table 29.

Table 29: Student and parent responses to the statement 'When I think of the Leaving Certificate, I feel [...]' (by year group)

Stakeholder Group		*Extremely Nervous*	*A Little Nervous*	*Not at All Nervous*
1st Year	*Count*	22	5	0
	%	81%	19%	0%
6th Year	*Count*	21	9	0
	%	70%	30%	0%
Total	*Count*	43	14	0
	%	75%	25%	0%

n=57

Close inspection of the survey data in Tables 28 and 29 highlights that First-Year students reported higher feelings of nerves than Sixth-Years who were undertaking their Leaving

Certificate Oral Assessment and were two months away from the written assessment at the time of data collection. It must also be noted that no single student in 1st Year or 6th Year indicated that he/she was 'not at all nervous' about the assessment. Focus group data provides further insight into the Leaving Certificate assessment and the culture surrounding the assessment in the case study school:

> I feel like the school, they make it, like, the Leaving Cert, they make it be, like, the main aim of your life.
> 5thYrStudent(didTY)1F

> They make you think that if you don't get high points in your Leaving Cert, then that's your life over.
> (5thYrStudent(noTY)3F)

Parents are also aware of the longstanding established culture of the case study school in relation to the Leaving Certificate:

> Very few people have ever failed their Leaving Cert in this school.
> (Parent5)

Hence, it is clear that stakeholders of the case study school perceive the Leaving Certificate as important. As a result, the culture of the assessment in the local school is connected to the identified purpose of assessment, as discussed in Theme 1. This culture, in turn, impacts on the wellbeing of students, as will be addressed in Theme Three.

Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme

The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) offers multiple opportunities for students to develop and learn outside of the traditional classroom environment, as discussed in Chapter Four. The LCVP, which was piloted in the case study school, has since been removed as an option. The most recent WSE/MLL evaluation report identified that the Inspectorate recommended it should be reinstated as an option for students of the case study school (2016g). At the behest of school management, the researcher carried out statistical analysis on two class groups, namely the class of 2017 (n=157) and the class of 2018 (n=141), in order to understand the potential impact of the LCVP on the CAO points of students.

In order to ascertain the potential summative increase in terms of CAO points, the researcher firstly added an LCVP 'merit' to each student's Leaving Certificate results list

and then calculated the CAO points based on the six highest points (including, where appropriate, the 46 points awarded for an LCVP merit). The increase in points from original CAO to recalculated CAO, including the merit grade, is presented in columns three and six in Table 30, below. As a second step, the researcher removed the LCVP 'merit' from the students' Leaving Certificate and replaced it with an LCVP distinction (for which a student would receive 66 CAO points). The sum of the top six-point scores was again calculated. The results from these processes are presented in columns four and seven in Table 30 below. In the table, the original number of CAO points actually achieved by students is presented in column two (actual results from 2017) and column five (actual results from 2018).

Table 30: Potential CAO points increase with a 'merit' and a 'distinction', for the 2017 and 2018 cohorts (n=298)

	Column 2	Column 3	Column 4	Column 5	Column 6	Column 7
Leaving Certificate CAO points range	2017 Number of students actually achieving these CAO points prior to LCVP being added.	2017 Number of students whose CAO points increase with LCVP merit	2017 Number of students whose CAO points increase with LCVP distinction	2018 Number of students actually achieving these CAO points prior to LCVP being added.	2018 Number of students whose CAO points increase with LCVP merit	2018 Number of students whose CAO points increase with LCVP distinction
0-50	4	4 (100%)	Same as merit	4	4(100%)	Same as merit
51-100	3	3 (100%)	Same as merit	7	7 (100%)	Same as merit
101-150	4	4 (100%)	Same as merit	9	9 (100%)	Same as merit
151-200	10	10 (100%)	Same as merit	8	8 (100%)	Same as merit
201-250	11	11 (100%)	Same as merit	18	18 (100%)	Same as merit
251-300	22	21 (95%)	22 (100%)	18	18 (100%)	Same as merit
301-350	22	20 (91%)	22 (100%)	15	13 (87%)	15 (100%)
351-400	29	9 (31%)	28 (97%)	21	10 (48%)	20 (95%)
401-450	16	1 (6%)	14 (88%)	18	6 (33%)	15 (83%)
451-500	22	1 (5%)	6 (27%)	16	0 (0%)	2 (13%)
501-550	14	1 (7%)	3 (21%)	7	0 (0%)	0%
Over 550 points: 0% of students increase CAO points						

Table 30 illustrates the number of students whose points may have increased should they have taken LCVP and achieved a merit or a distinction. For example, in 2017, 10 students

received a CAO points total of between 151 and 200 points. All 10 students, had they achieved a merit in LCVP, would have seen a point increase. To consider a second example, 15 students achieved a CAO points total of between 301 and 350 points in 2018. Thirteen of these 15 students would have benefitted from an LCVP merit, while all 15 would have increased their CAO points had they achieved a distinction in LCVP.

Hence, as illustrated in Table 30, 32 students from the 2017 cohort and 64 students from the 2018 cohort could have increased their CAO points with an LCVP merit. In addition, a further 44 students from 2017 and 15 students from 2018 could potentially have increased their CAO points with an LCVP distinction. From Table 30, it is clear that the LCVP would be of benefit to students who achieve fewer than 350 CAO points in the established Leaving Certificate, from the summative perspective of increasing the CAO points total. Table 31, below, outlines the mean CAO points increase for students in a given points band.

Table 31: Mean increase in total CAO points if students had achieved a 'merit' or 'distinction' in 2017 and 2018 (n=298)

Original CAO points band	Additional mean points with 2017 with LCVP merit	Additional mean points with 2018 with LCVP merit	Additional mean points with 2017 with LCVP distinction	Additional mean points with 2018 with LCVP distinction
Up to 100 points	44	44	66	66
101-200	43	39	65	61
201-300	28	28	44	50
301-400	7	8	28	27

As noted in Table 31, for example, students achieving an original CAO score of between 301 and 400 points would, on average, increase their points total by seven had they achieved an LCVP merit, while students in the same original points band would increase their CAO points total by 28 had they achieved a distinction, based on the 2017 and 2018 cohorts (n=298).

As presented in Table 30 and Table 31, if the LCVP was in place in the case study school, the expected impact on student CAO summative points would be as follows:

- 100% of students in the case study school achieving under 250 CAO points could have increased their CAO points with a 'merit' grade in the LCVP. This would have affected 32 students in 2017, and 46 students in 2018.

- 96% of all students achieving under 400 points would have increased their CAO points if they had achieved a 'distinction' in the LCVP.

- 86% of students achieving between 401-450 CAO points would have increased those points with a 'distinction' in the LCVP.

Hence, it is observed that the absence of a culture of LCVP in the case study school has resulted in students and parents being unaware of the summative benefits of the programme. However, it is proposed that the inclusion of the LCVP in the future could have a positive impact on the culture of assessment in the case study school where the impact of CAO points is concerned.

Of course, it is not guaranteed that every student would have actually increased his/her CAO points, as a merit and distinction are not guaranteed to students. As a result, Tables 30 and 31 are speculative. However, with regard to the culture of assessment, it is interesting that this statistical analysis was requested by school management. This further highlights the culture of assessment in the local school, whereby the potential summative increase of the LCVP is perceived as a desirable tool to measure and is used to increase 'buy-in' to the programme. This is a key point. Indeed, this information was requested during the period of Junior Cycle reform, and it highlights that, despite policy changes at Junior Cycle level, Senior Cycle education is focused on the continuous summative culture. It is proposed that this summative culture is perceived as so important by stakeholders due to the purpose of assessment outlined in Section 6.4.

Continuity and reform: The culture of national (state) assessments: Conclusion

It is noted that stakeholders focused on the CBAs and the Leaving Certificate assessment during the focus groups. As regards the research questions framing this research, it is clear that stakeholders had strong views on these post-primary assessments and that the culture of assessment impacted on these views. For example, from the empirical data, it is clear that many challenges and benefits of the CBAs were experienced by stakeholders.

Inconsistencies in the implementation of CBAs at a local level caused a challenge for students in particular. It is evident that the pre-existing summative culture impacted on the CBAs, which represented a reform to assessment which newly introduced a formal state assessment as ideally part of the ebb and flow of normal classroom management and activity. Stakeholders in the case study school reported that they perceived the CBAs as a waste of time, while other stakeholders described the CBA as very stressful and a significant effort. This demonstrates that the balance of the CBA as a reform to assessment which focused on a formative classroom-based approach had not yet been reached in the case study school. However, it is evident that the continuity of summative assessment in terms of the CAO points and the subsequent culture surrounding the Senior Cycle have permeated all stages of post-primary education and assessment for many stakeholders.

Indeed, stakeholders perceive the Leaving Certificate to be of significant importance. This is due to the purpose of assessment, as discussed in Theme One in Section 6.4. The Leaving Certificate assessment is understood by the vast majority of stakeholders, including students just beginning their post-primary Junior Cycle journey, to be a high-stakes assessment. As a result, a summative focus has been adopted by stakeholders in the case study school. This was further evidenced by the requested analysis of the LCVP and the potential summative impact it could have for students in terms of their total CAO points. It is proposed that the continuity of Leaving Certificate assessment has impacted on the culture of the reformed Junior Cycle assessment.

From a functionalist perspective, it is evident that, despite the reform taking place in education, reform of the Junior Cycle has enabled schools to incorporate different 21st-century skills in line with the needs of industry. This serves the economic needs of the nation. However, the education system continues to utilise the Leaving Certificate and CAO points for the purpose of supporting access to opportunity, and therefore to the eventual division of labour. Hence, it is proposed that the culture of assessment has successfully evolved to allow reform to occur while maintaining continuity of a culture of summative assessment that is established, understood, and accepted by stakeholders.

6.5.2 Continuity amidst reform: Local (school) assessments

As discussed in Section 6.5.1, reform of state or national assessments at Junior Cycle level is being incrementally introduced. However, irrespective of this reform, other local

assessments which have been established over time continue as they have done without change to the system. In particular, three local assessments are referred to in this section:

- School entrance assessment
- School Christmas (or November) assessment
- School February (or 'mock') assessment

The school calendar also shows that students undertake summer assessments. However, the subject of summer assessments did not arise during the focus groups. The culture of each of the three assessments is presented in this section with regard to continuity and reform.

The culture of the local entrance assessment

The school entrance assessment is undertaken by all students transitioning from primary to post-primary level. Students undertake this assessment during the month of February, approximately seven months prior to the beginning of their post-primary education (typically beginning in late August or early September). These dates are visible on the school calendar, depicted in Appendix G. The school entrance assessment consists of the CAT4 psychometric assessment, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three. This psychometric assessment is organised by the SEN Department, and data is utilised by the school to inform decision-making. As noted, the use of this assessment is established, and the process is not under reform.

In the initial focus group with teachers, it was evident that teachers believed that this assessment data should not be used or considered in isolation.

> If you sit down and have a conversation with a student, the amount of information you will get can be equally as valuable as a CAT score or standardised test.
> (Teacher5)

> You have to remember, it is one test on one day, and so the student may not have performed to the best of their ability […] they [the CAT4] are a starting point.
> (Teacher7)

This is noteworthy where the use of assessment data is concerned. It is clear that teachers perceive the CAT4 assessment data to be important only in the context of the holistic consideration of the student. This is vital with regard to the Inspectorate's

recommendations (2015d, 2016e, 2018f), and it will be discussed further in Chapter Seven.

From the student perspective, however, the challenges of the entrance assessment were clear. Students expressed frustration with the entrance assessment, highlighting three main reasons for their frustration:

(i) The content of the standardised test was unlike anything they had encountered previously, which they felt was unfair.

> I felt so unprepared for it.
> (2ndYrStudent3F)

> I remember sitting there trying to think […] 'I've never seen this before, so how am I supposed to know what to do, like?' […] It was stressful.
> (5thYrStudent(noTY)2F)

(ii) Students disclosed that they were unaware of the purpose of the assessment, and this impacted on their experience and on their perspectives. For example, the absence of a purpose led to the perception that the assessment was meaningless and a waste of time:

> Why did we do an entrance exam? It's a waste of our time, and it's probably a waste of the teacher's time […] What's the point?
> (3rdYrStudent1M)

> It felt useless.
> (2ndYrStudent2M)

> I don't think anyone knows how much it means […] if it means anything
> (6thYrStudent1M)

(iii) Similarly, in the absence of a clearly identified purpose, some students imagined a purpose which directly impacted on their experience:

> I thought they weren't going to let me in if I didn't do well.
> (2ndYrStudent2F)

> I just remember being really, really nervous for it.
> (5thYrStudent(noTY)1F)

However, the teacher focus group revealed that it is clear and defined school policy not to inform the majority of students and parents about the purpose of the assessment. Teachers were conscious that students were not aware of the purpose of this assessment.

> To be honest, the students here aren't really made aware of it.
> (Teacher1)

> they're not aware of what's happening in the background, just that they're being assessed.
> (Teacher7)

Hence, it is concluded that a lack of purpose and the presence of student confusion around this assessment is acknowledged and accepted by the teachers who implement the assessment.

The assessment environment, as the first experience of an assessment at post-primary level, is perceived as a challenge by many students:

> I felt really nervous because it was so formal.
> (TYStudent3M)

> I was more nervous about being in the school.
> (6thYrStudent2f)

The combination of the three elements discussed above (the assessment content, purpose, and environment) combines to directly impact the culture of the entrance assessment for students in the post-primary school. A culture of 'unawareness' has evolved due to a conscious lack of information about the assessment being provided to students and parents.

Indeed, the current procedure and management of assessment data in the case study school involve assessment data not normally being provided to parents or students. The focus group with teachers highlighted disagreements within the group with regard to this policy. Some teachers felt that assessment data should be released to stakeholders, and other teachers felt the data should not be released. The concern, for teachers, with regard to the sharing of assessment data, was that the data would be misperceived or misunderstood by stakeholders:

> I think by giving a parent a standardised score, 'there's your child', I think some parents might look at [it and] think, 'Oh my god, my child is not performing', and it's not reflective necessarily of a child's ability, and they need to see the overall picture, so I would be very reluctant to give out scores.
> (Teacher7)

Other teachers in the focus group disagreed and advocated for the data to be communicated to parents.

> I don't think that, though. I don't think how a parent is going to take a test result is going to decide whether we give it to them or not. You know, how they take it is their business […] As a parent, I would 100% want that CAT score.
> (Teacher5)

Hence, a level of disagreement was evident amongst teachers concerning the sharing of assessment data with parents. This issue emerged as problematic in the parent focus groups, as, similarly to students, confusion around the assessment was evident. Indeed, the purpose of the entrance assessment and the policy surrounding access to the assessment data was discussed at length. A general lack of awareness was evident amongst parents in relation to this issue:

> I don't know much about it, actually, so I couldn't answer that question, 'cause I don't really know.
> (Parent1)

However, following discussion on the topic by the focus group members, all parents agreed that they would opt to know about the assessment data obtained on their child.

> I'd like to have them; it's the only objective assessment of where my child is compared nationally with their peers […] I'd like to get that.
> (Parent4)

Indeed, the case study school actively uses the CAT4 assessment results as baseline data, without the knowledge, and therefore without the informed consent, of parents and students. There is a clear, established, and conscious culture of an absence of communication with stakeholders where this assessment is concerned.

The school utilises this summative data for decision-making in relation to student needs. In addition, as discussed in Chapter One, the Inspectorate recommends that schools generally 'include a comparison of student outcomes against the standardised tests administered on entry to the School […] These measures will provide a more realistic perspective on student performance' (DES, 2016e, p.3). Hence, in order to understand the relationship between the entrance assessment data and subsequent post-primary assessments carried out in post-primary school, this research included the calculation of correlation coefficients between the data sets (as discussed in the methodology chapter). The results of the correlations between the CAT4 entrance assessment and other post-primary assessments for the class of 2018 were analysed, and these are outlined in Table 32, below. The reader is reminded that, in calculating this correlation coefficient, the

'mean' score on the CAT4 was utilised along with the 'mean' score of the student assessment in question.

Table 32: Mean correlation coefficients between CAT4 assessment and the set of assessments for the class of 2018 as they progressed through post-primary school (n=138)[3]

Assessment Number	School Assessment	Correlation Coefficient (r)	*p*-value
1.	First-Year Christmas Assessment	0.78	0.000*
2.	First-Year February Assessment	0.77	0.000*
3.	First-Year Summer Assessment	0.74	0.000*
4.	Second-Year Christmas Assessment	0.68	0.000*
5.	Second-Year Summer Assessment	0.74	0.000*
6.	Junior Certificate Christmas Assessment	0.66	0.000*
7.	Junior Certificate Mock Assessment	0.73	0.000*
8.	Junior Certificate	0.76	0.000*
9.	Fifth-Year Christmas Assessment	0.69	0.000*
10.	Fifth-Year February Assessment	0.65	0.000*
11.	Fifth-Year Summer Assessment	0.66	0.000*
12.	Sixth-Year Christmas Assessment	0.68	0.000*
13.	Leaving Certificate Mock Assessment	0.66	0.000*
14.	Leaving Certificate Assessment	0.34	0.000*

As outlined in Table 32, focusing on the correlation coefficients, there is a positive correlation between the CAT4 and further school assessments. This correlation ranges between 0.65 (February assessment in Fifth Year) and 0.78 (Christmas assessment in First Year). While there is a positive correlation between the CAT4 and subsequent post-primary assessments, a general pattern of decrease in correlation is present. This is interesting with regard to the established culture of utilising entrance assessment data as baseline data in the case study school. It is also interesting where the Inspectorate's recommendations are concerned (2016e, 2015d, 2018f), and therefore in relation to the

[3] Items with a *p*-value of less than 0.05 at the 95% level of confidence are significantly different. Significant items are marked with a *. Correlation among the variables is evaluated using the Pearson correlation coefficient. Please see Appendix H for more information.

interpretation we can attribute to such a process. This will be discussed further in Chapter 7.

The culture of the local Christmas (November) assessments

All students, with the exception of Transition-Year students, undertake Christmas assessments in the case study school. The approach and management of Christmas assessments varies between subject departments, and indeed between teachers within subject departments, in the case study school. However, it is a process that is established and not under reform within the local case study school. Teachers are at liberty to plan and implement a suitable assessment for their classes, and they are required to complete a 'Christmas report' which will be distributed to parents at the end of the term. This flexible approach to the established assessment means that the experience of stakeholders will vary in accordance with:

(i) the student year group

(ii) teacher preference

For example, Sixth-Year students undertake assessments during a clearly defined, pre-determined and limited period in mid-November (prior to Christmas). These dates are clearly highlighted for students on the school calendar (Appendix G), which is available to all stakeholders at the start of each academic year. Students in all other year groups undertake other assessments during the last week in November (also highlighted on the school calendar in Appendix G). All Christmas assessments (described on the school calendar during the month of November as Term One assessments) take place within class teaching time (rather than as structured assessments which replace the regular school timetable, which occur for the February and summer assessments). Throughout the focus groups, students questioned the need for the Christmas assessments:

> The one assessment I can think of that's pointless is probably the Christmas exams, because I don't really see the point in the Christmas exams if we then have an assessment in February.
> (TYStudent2F)

Although students noted the 'pointlessness' of the Christmas assessment, parents perceived the associated assessment reports as important, as they provide information on the child.

> It's what we get feedback on.
> (Parent4)

> You're getting a lot of information back in the report (Parent2)

Hence, it is proposed that the 'point' of the Christmas assessment is to provide students within information to be reported to parents at Christmas. The survey data added to this perspective and highlighted that stakeholders perceive a significant link between the relationship of assessment and reporting, as illustrated below, in Table 33.

Table 33: Teachers assess students so they can write reports for parents (by stakeholder group)

Stakeholder Group		***Agree***	***Indifferent***	***Disagree***
1st Year	*Count*	19	7	4
	%	8.64%	3.18%	1.82%
2nd Year	*Count*	21	6	3
	%	9.55%	2.72%	1.36%
3rd Year	*Count*	20	3	7
	%	9.09%	1.36%	3.18%
4th Year	*Count*	20	5	5
	%	9.09%	2.27%	2.27%
5th Year	*Count*	18	9	3
	%	8.18%	4.09%	1.36%
6th Year	*Count*	18	3	9
	%	8.18%	1.36%	4.09%
Parents	*Count*	23	2	15
	%	10.45%	0.9%	6.81%
Total	*Count*	139	35	46
	%	63%	16%	21%

n=220 (180 students and 40 parents)

A strong cohort of students and a large proportion of parents agreed that teachers assess students due to reporting responsibilities. This is interesting concerning the purpose of assessment as discussed in relation to Theme One, and it may promote a culture of summative assessment within the case study school.

The culture of the local February assessments

In the case study school, February assessments are formally structured and are timetabled for all students (except for Transition Year students) as a scheduled interruption to regular class teaching timetable in the case study school. The assessments took place over an eight-day period during the year in which this research was undertaken. During this time period, Third- and Sixth-Year students undertake their 'mock' examinations in preparation for state examinations in June. All other students undertake assessments that

are created by their subject teachers. Focus group data highlighted that students from all year groups displayed an awareness of the 'high-stakes' nature of the February assessment. This assessment induced stress for students in all year groups and was not limited to those preparing directly for the state assessments.

> It was really, really stressful trying to get your head around it, and it was like […] we are only around six months in, in Fifth Year, and we got these […] for everyone to be making a big deal out of these exams.
> (5thYrStudent(noTY)3M)

> I think they should get rid of the February exams because people would be stressing over how they would do.
> (2ndYrStudent1F)

It is interesting that the 5th-Year student noted that 'everyone' makes 'a big deal out of these exams'; this suggests that the established culture of this longstanding assessment within the case study school nurtures itself.

While students observe the high-stakes nature of the assessment, they also question the presence of the assessment as an established part of the culture of the case study school, particularly as it is not an assessment which is undertaken in other post-primary schools in the local area.

> we're the only school in [the local area] that does that.
> (1stYrStudent3F)

> no other school has February exams.
> (2ndYrStudent3F)

It is noteworthy that students desire reform of this assessment, given the absence of similar assessments in neighbouring schools; however, they simultaneously 'buy in' to the established culture of this assessment given the continuity of the culture of the assessment in the local school.

Continuity amidst reform: Local assessment: Conclusion

This research seeks to understand the perspectives of stakeholders in a case study school during a period of simultaneous continuity and reform. In discussing the local school assessments, it was clear that the system of local assessment was well-established, with three main assessments dominating discussion in the focus groups. While stakeholders

acknowledged the importance of assessment, as outlined in relation to Theme One, the culture of assessment was generally observed by stakeholders to be challenging in relation to local school assessments. The entrance assessment, for example, is characterised by an absence of information, and it is undertaken by students who are unaware of its purpose, have not been previously exposed to the content and who are subjected to a large-scale formal assessment as their first assessment in post-primary education. For parents, there is an absence of information, which leads to confusion as to the purpose and outcome of this assessment. It was not the role of the researcher to inform parents and students of the purpose of the assessment and the use of assessment data. However, it is proposed that an increased awareness of the purpose of the assessment would impact on the culture of the assessment. The Christmas and February assessments are perceived as summative experiences by stakeholders, and the primary benefit of the assessments is communication by way of a report following the assessment. Hence, it is interesting that an absence of culture around the communication on the entrance assessment is not consistent with the subsequent culture of communication on subsequent post-primary assessment. Indeed, it is perceived that planned reporting provides a purpose for the Christmas and February assessments in line with the summative purpose of the assessments discussed in relation to Theme One.

In applying a functionalist lens to assessment in the post-primary school, it is evident that the culture of assessment is such that each post-primary assessment provides summative information on the learning of a student, which prepares stakeholders in terms of the final post-primary assessment, the Leaving Certificate. In this way, the frequency of assessment and reporting post-assessment provide stability to the education system. Stakeholders remain informed as to how they/their child are/is performing within the system; this provides accountability, as discussed in relation to Theme One. Hence, it is proposed that post-primary assessment provides order and consistency of approach in the short term, which benefits the system in the long term, as all stakeholders prepare for the final assessment. The entrance assessment, however, is an anomaly for students and parents. While teachers are aware of the functionality of this assessment, students and parents are not. Nonetheless, students sit the assessment and parents are aware that it occurs. In the absence of knowledge and communication about this assessment, stakeholders continue to partake in this assessment. This indicates a trust in the culture of the school on behalf of stakeholders, where assessment is concerned.

6.5.3 Where continuity meets reform: The issue of over-assessing

Sections 6.5.1 and 6.5.2 presented the empirical data gathered in this research in relation to state assessment and local school assessment, respectively. As noted, reform of assessment mainly involves the Junior Cycle state assessments, while Senior Cycle assessments and the structure of local school assessments continue as they have for many years. The empirical data has indicated that the continuity of established local assessment, when combined with reformed Junior Cycle assessment and the introduction of CBAs in particular, has led to a perceived over-assessment of students in the post-primary system. For example, the student focus group documented the following student perspectives on the issue:

> the entrance exams kind of like set the tone of what secondary school is going to be like, like, all the exams, and stuff like that. At least you start off doing the exam; you don't just get straight into the school and then [get] bombarded with a load of exams; you actually start off doing that before you're even in the school. (TYStudent1M)

> It's too many tests.
> (1stYrStudent1F)

The comment from the Transition-Year student above is exceptionally rich, as it documents his perception of post-primary school as an experience which is defined by assessment. He notes that the entrance assessment, which is undertaken during the February prior to starting post-primary school, sets the tone for the entire post-primary experience. Empirical data from the parent focus group showed that the parent perspective aligned with the student perspective on this issue:

> I feel personally that there's constant exams; there's a lot.
> (Parent5)

> I'm exactly the same [feeling that there's constant exams].
> (Parent3)

This suggests that students and parents perceive the culture of the case study school to be one that is assessment orientated. In addition to the views expressed by students and parents, teachers also referred to this culture of assessment within the school, and they identified a concern that the quantity of assessment may be approaching an upper limit.

> And I think what we are going to run into as well is a problem of over-assessing them.
> (Teacher6)

However, it must be noted that the issue of over-assessing students is not limited to the case study school. Processes of continuity of assessment, when combined with assessment reform at Junior Cycle level, have resulted in a national education issue. The Director of Assessment (NCCA) recognised that a culture of overassessment potentially exists within the post-primary system at large. However, he observed that the established culture at a local level is difficult to change:

> Its cultural change […] If I asked 100 teachers and they said to me 'the pressure of assessment is getting too great' […] The Department give you permission to do without, to do away with the mock exams… and 90% of teachers say 'No. We don't want that'
> (Director of Assessment, NCCA)

This is a significant issue concerning the culture of assessment. It demonstrates that a primary difficulty with reform is that of the established culture, which strengthens continuity. This research has found that there is an awareness of over-assessment amongst stakeholders, but it is possible that teachers are not the only ones who are reluctant to change established assessment practices. Although the focus group data indicated that parents are aware of the quantity of assessment within post-primary schools, the survey data did not mirror this finding, as illustrated in Table 34.

Table 34: Teachers are over-assessing (by stakeholder group)

Stakeholder Group		*Agree*	*Indifferent*	*Disagree*
Students	*Count*	130	7	43
	%	72%	4%	24%
Parents	*Count*	3	5	32
	%	8%	12%	80%
Total	*Count*	133	12	75
	%	60%	6%	34%

n=220 (180 students and 40 parents)

The survey data highlighted that students and parents hold different, indeed polarised, perspectives on the quantity of post-primary assessment. Hence, in relation to the comment of the Director of Assessment detailed above, it is possible that teachers and parents may agree on this issue, or it might be the case that teachers are reluctant to reform local assessment practices due to the anticipated disagreement from parents who are in favour of current assessment practices. In conclusion, there is consistency amongst students in their perspectives on over-assessment. However, an inconsistency in the perspectives of teachers and parents is evident in relation to this issue.

The Director of Assessment (NCCA) acknowledged the role of culture within the current system of post-primary education and the quantity of assessments as one which continuously generates 'an exam psyche' amongst stakeholders. Indeed, students disclosed that their current priority for learning in post-primary education was to achieve as high a summative score on assessments as possible:

> why should l learn anything if it's not going to benefit me points-wise?
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)1F)

> you're almost looking more and more [at] how to cheat the system, how to predict what's coming up, what questions you might be asked, as opposed to actually learning the material.
> (6thYrStudent2M)

The perceived importance of CAO points and the status of summative assessments in the Irish post-primary system have led to a culture of the publicly funded education system being supported by numerous commercial supports and the evolution of a lucrative grinds culture in Ireland. Parents referred to the established culture of the grinds industry and the subsequent impact for their children and their families:

> the thing that stresses me out is the amount of children […] that are getting grinds and going to The Institute and Saturdays and all that. We didn't do it, and I'm kind of going […] in the back of my head […] have I put my kids at a disadvantage?
> (Parent3)

> in our house, we would have a principle – a massive objection to grinds – but we ended up doing it.
> (Parent4)

Parents were very clear on their perspectives towards grinds. However, it is clear that the grinds culture has an impact on stakeholders due to the current summative purpose of assessment and the established culture.

6.5.4 Where continuity meets reform: The role of the teacher

As noted by the Director of Assessment in Section 6.5.3, above, the role of the teacher is integral in relation to the reform of the assessment culture. However, the director also acknowledged that, in terms of Junior Cycle and assessment reform, policymakers were hesitant to provide input from the 'top down'; instead, the national approach was to identify what emerged from local institutions and from teachers implementing the reform:

> we are looking to schools to see what practice will emerge from there rather than, in isolation from practice, drop[ping] something on the system.
> (Director of Assessment, NCCA):

Teachers, however, expressed frustration at the level of information and training they were afforded in relation to reform of Junior Cycle assessment. Teachers expressed confusion about the expectations of policymakers concerning their assessment practice.

> in terms of training, in terms of finance, in terms of everything. It was done the wrong way around.
> (Teacher1)

> it needs to come from the top.
> (Teacher5)

> am I doing the right thing? Am I doing something they're going to be tested on? […] I mean, next year, I'm going to be teaching to an exam, which is not what's supposed to happen.
> (Teacher1)

Hence, it is clear that teachers felt unsupported in terms of Junior Cycle reform. As a result, as noted in relation to the third teacher quote above, the established culture of teaching to an exam will permeate the reformed assessment, 'which is not what's supposed to happen'. This is a key point in relation to the culture of assessment during a period of continuity and reform.

Indeed, irrespective of the absence of guidance 'from the top', the role of teachers has a significant impact on the experiences, and therefore the perceptions, of stakeholders. This will be discussed in detail later in this section. However, in the context of reform, students expressed appreciation for teachers who are dynamic and contemporary in their approach to assessment:

> We get a list on a certain topic that we were studying, and we do 'last man standing' […]; it was a fun way of doing it.
> (TYStudent2F)

> Bezinga. It's kind of like a little game thing, but it's showing everybody what you learned […], so it actually encourages you to study, and it's kind of, like, a bit of fun, so you want to go to class as well.
> (TYStudent1M)

While dynamic assessment was described as 'fun' in the focus groups, survey data indicates that students do not generally find post-primary assessment to be enjoyable or engaging. Survey results show that a strong majority of students in every year group disagreed/strongly disagreed that assessment is an engaging and enjoyable experience, as illustrated in Table35:

Table 35: Assessment is an engaging and enjoyable experience for me (by year group)

Year group		*Disagree Strongly*	*Disagree*	*Indifferent*	*Agree*	*Agree Strongly*
1st Year	*Count*	11	13	4	2	0
	%	6.11%	7.22%	2.22%	1.11%	0%
2nd Year	*Count*	17	11	1	1	0
	%	9.44%	6.11%	0.56%	0.56%	0%
3rd Year	*Count*	16	9	2	3	0
	%	8.89%	5%	1.11%	1.67%	0%
4th Year	*Count*	12	14	1	2	1
	%	6.67%	7.78%	0.56%	1.11%	0.56%
5th Year	*Count*	15	9	2	1	3
	%	8.33%	5%	1.11%	0.56%	1.67%
6th Year	*Count*	12	15	0	3	0
	%	6.67%	8.33%	0%	1.67%	0%
Total	*Count*	83	71	10	12	4
	%	46.11%	39.44%	5.56%	6.67%	2.22%

n=180

Of particular note in Table 35 is the fact that the students who strongly agreed that assessment is an engaging and enjoyable experience were Transition-Year students and Fifth-Year students. Hence, it is argued that, while certain teachers engage with methodologies to enhance student engagement and enjoyment, a large majority of students disagree/strongly disagree that assessment is engaging and enjoyable. This is problematic with regard to the creation of a reformed culture of assessment. It is evident that student perspectives towards assessment are a challenge where assessment is concerned. The following challenges to the implementation of assessment by teachers were identified through thematic analysis of the qualitative data:

The awareness of teachers concerning assessment reform

As noted above, teachers were aware that reform of the Junior Cycle was problematic, as a perceived lack of direction from 'the top' confused the process. This perception was felt by stakeholders, who acknowledged that their teachers were uncertain:

> In my opinion, I […] think the teachers didn't know themselves.
> (3rdYrStudent2M)

> they don't know what's going to be on our exam. Like, they barely know the layout.
> (3rdYrStudent1F)

> they weren't all on top of it […] so that led to uncertainty.
> (Parent4)

This was a challenge for stakeholders. However, this lack of awareness and training of teachers with regard to assessment reform is an issue which is not limited to the case study school. Indeed, the Director of Assessment (NCCA) acknowledged that a level of confusion exists within the national system:

> it's a complicated landscape, too, for parents to try and get their head around, and for teachers as well, you know…my sense is that there's no clarity on it.
> (Director of Assessment, NCCA)

Hence, it is possible that stakeholders on a national level were directly affected by the subject teacher's approach to state assessment, due to a lack of training and awareness.

In relation to continuity and reform, the awareness of teachers concerning assessment reform is a key issue. As noted by one teacher:

> we are trying to fit a new model into an old system
> (Teacher1)

Indeed, it is a concern that assessment reform will be permeated by assessment continuity and that, in the absence of clarity, the impact of reform will become diluted. This is a concern in relation to the established summative culture which has emerged in line with the purpose of assessment, as discussed in relation to the purpose of assessment (Theme One), and it is highly problematic where reform of an established system is concerned.

Trustworthiness of teachers' corrections

As illustrated in Table 36, below, the trustworthiness of teachers' corrections is perceived by students as a challenge. However, it is not an issue for parents who perceive that teachers produce the correct assessment score.

Table 36: Assessment results are trustworthy (by stakeholder group)

Stakeholder Group		***Agree***	***Indifferent***	***Disagree***
Students	*Count*	45	14	121
	%	25%	8%	67%
Parents	*Count*	29	5	3
	%	78%	14%	8%
Total	*Count*	74	19	124
	%	34%	9%	57%

n=217 (180 students and 37 parents)

In relation to the trust of students and parents in the role of the teacher in relation to assessment results, a polarity of views can be identified. This is interesting in relation to the culture of assessment, and it indicates that students are more likely to distrust the system, while parents are more likely to trust it. Discussions in the student focus groups yielded further information on the issue. Indeed, the following First- and Sixth Year quotes summarise student perspectives in all year groups:

> they're only human, like; they're gonna make a mistake, you know.
> (1stYrStudent3F)

> there would obviously be a bias if your teacher was scoring you […] it's human to be biased.
> (6thYrStudent1F)

Although parents indicated in the survey data that they believed assessment results were trustworthy, in the focus groups, parents expressed awareness of an example of systemic unfairness and a lack of trust in the post-primary education system whereby 'one class actually was given an extra week' (Parent5) to complete a CBA.

Hence, it is proposed that stakeholders do not always trust the system of assessment in post-primary school. A stronger culture of mistrust exists among the student body than the parent group. However, irrespective of the potential for teachers to make 'a mistake' or be 'biased', a culture of acceptance also exists wherein the role of the teacher is perceived as vital by stakeholders in relation to assessment.

The importance of the classroom teacher

Irrespective of the perceived lack of training of the classroom teacher and of the possibility of a mistake or bias within assessment practices, the teacher is perceived as pivotal and vital for students as they negotiate all assessment processes irrespective of their status in terms of continuity or reform. For example, stakeholders outlined in the focus groups that they viewed the role of the teacher in the classroom as extremely influential: as one student described, they are the face of the system:

> they are our first point of contact with the education system.
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)2M)

This is a rich and insightful quote from a Fifth-Year student who perceived the teacher to be the face of the system at large. In relation to the culture of assessment and the role of the teacher, teachers were aware that a cultural shift must take place within the system. However, they did not view themselves as integral to that role:

> I talk about changing mind-sets, but I don't know how that will come about […] It's not our role.
> (Teacher3)

> No.
> (Teacher2)

However, with regard to the importance of the impact of the classroom teacher, students perceive the teacher as integral with regard to the culture of assessment in the classroom. For example, students describe the impact of their individual assessment data as impacting on all aspects of the student-teacher relationship. Focus group data indicates that students believe their assessment results affect how they are regarded by the class teacher (e.g. a poor result will have a negative effect on one's standing with the teacher). In addition, with regard to the 'accountability factor' of assessment results (as discussed under Theme One), students are aware of the impact of the assessment result on their rank, and the knock-on impact of this within the system.

> if you're not doing well, I think teachers are like, 'Oh they're just a dosser; they don't really know what's happening […] I'm going to try to put these people down to ordinary level so they're not bothering my average'
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)3F)

> Say, if you don't do well on a test, that's up to you to revise and get up to standard with it. Say, if you just don't understand, like, there's nothing you […] like, you could ask […] but some teachers might get annoyed because they've gone over it already […] they might think that you're not putting the effort in, but you might be.
> (2ndYrStudent2F)

Hence, it is clear that a culture of importance exists with regard to the perceived role of the teacher in a student's journey through post-primary assessment. Students care what their teachers think. Students perceive that summative assessment results will impact the student-teacher relationship, which, in turn, may impact the experience, and therefore the culture, of subsequent assessments within post-primary school.

Where continuity meets reform: The role of the teacher: Conclusion

This research seeks to understand the perspectives of stakeholders regarding post-primary assessment in a case study school during a period of simultaneous continuity and reform. This section discussed issues arising from the empirical data in relation to the role of the teacher. The importance of the teacher is accepted by all stakeholders. However, the teacher can present a challenge within a school for students in relation to assessment. For example, while some teachers present a contemporary and dynamic approach to assessment, in general, students perceive a lack of engagement and enjoyment where their experience of post-primary assessment is concerned. This relates to both national and local assessments. In addition, where teachers are perceived by stakeholders to be unsure in terms of assessment reform, this can have an impact on the culture of assessment as experienced by stakeholders. It is also proposed that where teachers are unsure of assessment reform, an element of their past experience of assessment may be utilised which impacts negatively on reform and enhances continuity of an outgoing system. The trustworthiness of teacher grading was a topic which yielded mixed, indeed polarised stakeholder perceptions. Students questioned the trustworthiness of assessment results, while the majority of parents accepted them. However, while students questioned the trustworthiness of assessment results, the main challenge for students in particular is the impact of their assessment attainment with regard to the relationship they have with their teacher. Students noted that, if their summative performance in an assessment is poorer than expected, a potential deterioration in terms of the student-teacher relationship is anticipated. This impacts on the culture of assessment and creates a high-stakes

environment for students with regard to all assessments conducted by their classroom teachers.

6.5.5 Stakeholders perceive assessment through the culture of assessment: Conclusion

This section presented the empirical data in relation to the second theme identified through thematic analysis: stakeholders perceive assessment through the culture of assessment. At the time of data collection, the Junior Cycle curriculum was undergoing reform, while the Senior Cycle curriculum was continuing as it had done, without significant change. A discussion of empirical data found that, while it was identified by stakeholders that a 'new' culture should be emerging in line with reform, inconsistencies and a perceived lack of direction from 'the top' had restricted the development of the 'new' culture. As a result, stakeholders perceived the reformed Junior Cycle assessment through the lens of the established culture. Stakeholders were not entirely consistent in their perceptions of the reformed CBA; while some identified the benefits and felt the assessment to be a student-friendly addition to assessment, others felt more 'cynical' towards the reformed assessment. It is proposed that the dominant culture of the Leaving Certificate assessment permeates the purpose of the Junior Cycle and renders the changes less significant than they were planned to be. Similarly, the LCVP, which has much to add to the Leaving Certificate Curriculum in terms of 21st century skills, as discussed in Chapter Four, was perceived by management as best understood through summative quantification of potential grade increases. It is proposed that, in order for the assessment culture to undergo significant change, the purpose of the Senior Cycle assessment as explored in relation to Theme One must firstly be adjusted. Hence, it is recognised by stakeholders that, although there are benefits to assessment reform at Junior Cycle level, the benefits are outweighed by the challenges presented at Senior Cycle level.

Irrespective of reform at Junior Cycle level, the case study school continues to operate a long-established system of local assessment. This further impacts the culture of assessment within the case study school. It is noteworthy that it is school policy to not report the entrance assessment results to students and parents. This is in contrast with other local assessments, which are perceived by the majority to be conducted in order to report to parents. The challenge for the school in reporting the entrance assessment results relates to the anticipated perception of stakeholders.

Through a functionalist theoretical perspective, it is proposed that it has been difficult for the culture within the case study school to evolve in line with Junior Cycle reform, as the current culture provides a certain, well-established role for stakeholders. Regular summative assessment in the case study school provides all stakeholders with an understanding of where they (the students) or their child are/is positioned relative to other students. It provides the stakeholders with information relating to positioning with regard to the Leaving Certificate assessment in line with the purpose of assessment addressed in Theme One. This subsequently provides them with insight and a sense of knowing about the future. The Director of Assessment (NCCA) explained that there is a 'consistency of expectation' within the Irish post-primary system. Reform at Junior Cycle is coming up against an established culture, one which continues to function parallel to Junior Cycle reform. Through a functionalist lens, if one system is perceived to continue to function effectively, it is difficult for a subsequent reformed system to emerge.

6.6 Theme Three: Stakeholders perceive that post-primary assessment has an impact on student wellbeing

The third theme identified through thematic analysis of the data is that of the relationship between post-primary assessment and wellbeing. In order to introduce this theme, it is noted that the Director of Assessment (NCCA) stated that achieving and maintaining excellent wellbeing among students ought to be a 'central pillar' of our education system. In addition, this sentiment was echoed by the stakeholders of the case study school.

> We had over 4,000 people marching in From Darkness into Light [an annual walk to facilitate awareness about mental health issues] at the weekend. We have to be aware that the mental health issue is there, and it's getting bigger, and it's getting more challenging for teenagers.
> (Parent2)

The large event at a local level indicates the level of awareness and commitment throughout the local community with regard to wellbeing. Hence, it is proposed that 'wellbeing' is a shared and central theme for stakeholders and policymakers alike. The relationship between post-primary assessment and wellbeing is explored in this section in relation to two sub-themes:

1. The impact of achievement (6.6.1).
2. Stakeholder voice (6.6.2).

In discussing these sub-themes, it must be noted that the purpose of assessment (Theme One) and the culture of assessment (Theme Two) impact on the third identified theme: post-primary assessment and its impact on wellbeing.

6.6.1 The impact of achievement

This section presents empirical data relating to post-primary assessment, subsequent relative achievement, and the perceived impact on wellbeing. In particular, this sub-theme was addressed by stakeholders during the qualitative phase of data collection. Stakeholders spoke about three main elements in relation to achievement: (i) competition, (ii) pressure and (iii) absence of stress.

Competition

As discussed in Section 6.4, stakeholders perceive themselves in relation to their relative status and performance. This was perceived as a benefit to assessment in relation to Theme One. Indeed, throughout the qualitative data, there was evidence of the 'fun' and 'healthy' presence of competition both between students (peer-comparison motivation) and within students themselves (self-motivation). In this way, stakeholders perceive that a sense of competition is a motivating factor for students:

> competition can be fun sometimes.
> (TYStudent2F)

> they're competitive […] they are competitive amongst themselves, but it's healthy.
> (Parent3)

However, a simultaneous concern for the level of competition between students was also evident in relation to wellbeing. A lack of student achievement or a relatively low individual assessment score was experienced by stakeholders as a challenge, and negative feelings were expressed.

> they always compare us by our grades.
> (2ndYrStudent2f)

> If someone gets, like, 98% in a test, they get them to come up to the top of the room, and then if the lowest was […] 20, they say that person's name. I mean, that's just, like, degrading.
> (2ndYrStudent3M)

> you're competing against your friends for grades, and you're not good enough, you're not smart enough; and to think all of these things nearly every class, every day, affects your brain so much, especially when you're just developing.
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)1F)

> if you get a 70 having studied for ages, and someone else can just go and get, like, 100 without opening a book once […] it kinda messes with you.
> (1stYrStudentF)

The language used by students of a variety of ages was exceptionally descriptive. Students noted the 'degrading' experience they had witnessed, which they identified as occurring during a period 'when you're just developing'. Students insightfully noted that it 'messes with you'. Hence, it is proposed that students are exceptionally clear about the potential challenging or negative impact of assessment on wellbeing for a student in the Irish post-primary culture, in relation to the purpose of assessment. Competition through achievement in assessment adds a layer of pressure to assessment – the pressure to achieve relative to peers. This sense of competition can be connected to 'rank' in comparison with peers. In this way, competition fuels the culture of assessment; for example, in the creation and continued growth of a grinds culture, as discussed in Section 2.2.3. Competition within post-primary assessment promotes a culture within which there is pressure to achieve.

Pressure to achieve

Students in the focus groups explained that they perceived the presence of pressure around assessment, a clear pressure to achieve. This pressure was expressed by students from every year group. To highlight this, a Senior Cycle student and a Junior Cycle student are quoted below to illustrate that this assessment-related pressure is felt throughout post-primary education and is not limited to state-exam year groups.

> There's so much pressure.
> (5thYrStudent(noTY)3F)

> you put a lot of pressure on yourself. Well, I do anyway, and I know a lot of people that do.
> (1styrstudentF)

Hence, it is proposed that assessments in the post-primary system are a direct source of pressure for students from the earliest of stages in post-primary education. Stakeholders noted that pressure to achieve impacts students in several ways. For example, students perceive that assessment pressure impacts upon assessment preparation, performance, and the assessment experience itself:

> You don't have time to think in some exams, like, even if you know what you have to get down; you just run out of time.
> (6thYrStudent2F)

> you know all the information you're supposed to know, and then you sit down to do it; you might stress yourself too much about it and forget some of the words.
> (2ndYrStudent2F)

> some kids could be nervous about an exam. I know from friends of mine, their nerves the night before they go […] they don't go to bed until 2 o'clock in the morning, because they are studying until 2 o'clock in the morning before an exam.
> (Parent5)

Once again, students of all year groups noted these pressures. Stress relating to assessment was evident for Second-Year students, while Sixth-Year students were focused on maximising their grade in relation to the time available during assessment. This perception of pressure related to the purpose of assessment was discussed in Section 6.4, with students perceiving summative achievement to be their main goal. This has a clear impact on student wellbeing. As one parent noted, students prioritise assessment and study over sleep, and therefore, over their wellbeing. Indeed, the impact of assessment-related pressures on a student's healthy life-balance was evident in all focus groups.

> you kind of have to put everything to the side. Say, like, if a test is coming, you don't get to see your friends as much, or, like, being involved with your family, it's just all school stuff, and it just affects you really negatively.
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)1F)

> Assessment […] does do its job, but it's also, like, at what cost? At what cost, like? At what cost to your personal life experience?
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)2M)

Students identified the personal cost of assessment in terms of their wellbeing. Students also discussed the impact of summative achievement in relation to their short- and

medium-term educational decision-making. Pressure around assessment impacted upon decision-making for students. For example, students demonstrated an awareness that personal decisions are made due to perceived and real stressors within the post-primary system of assessment.

> some people just drop to Ordinary because they're stressed, not because they are technically bad at maths or anything.
> (3rdYrStudent1F)

> I was thinking, 'Okay, what if I do bad with my project or if I mess something up, then I could fail the whole thing', so I didn't do [the subject]; but looking back now, I really regret it. I wish I did it. I loved [the subject].
> (5thYrStudent(noTY)2F)

Students across all year groups noted the pressure to achieve. Some students perceived the pressure as coming from themselves, while others suggested that it comes from their teachers and parents. Throughout the focus groups, students used vocabulary such as 'dread', 'judgement day' and 'nerve-wracking' to describe assessment-related pressure. Students explained that the pressure to perform well in exams resulted in assessments being prioritised above all other activities. In speaking about assessments, students frequently used words such as 'pressure', 'stress', 'disappointment' and 'anxiety'. Interestingly, this was not consistent with the views of parents, who perceived their own children as being stress-free.

> Well, mine isn't [stressed].
> (Parent3)

> I don't expect major stress.
> (Parent4)

This is interesting in relation to the point made in relation to Table 24 which shows polarity between the perspectives of students and parents on the issue of the 'fairness' of post-primary assessment. 36% of students (n=180) perceived assessment to be unfair to students, while 82% of parents (n=45) disagreed. It is also interesting in relation to Table 33, wherein parent and student responses to the statement 'teachers are over-assessing' are presented. As detailed in this table, 72% of students agreed/strongly agreed that teachers are over-assessing, while 80% of parents disagreed/strongly disagreed. Hence, it is proposed that students feel a greater burden with regard to assessment than is perceived by parents. This burden results in stress for students, which is not always identified by

parents. However, it must also be noted that the absence of stress was also identified within the empirical data.

Absence of stress

While the data highlighted that students felt competition and pressure associated with assessment in general, students also discussed lower levels of pressure and stress which were directly associated with certain educational experiences. These experiences were discussed in relation to individual development in Section 6.4.1. However, they are discussed in this section in relation to wellbeing. In particular, students identified Transition Year as being stress-free due to the nature of assessment during this year. As noted in relation to the school calendar (Appendix G), Transition-Year students are scheduled for 'trips' instead of assessments. More importantly, however, Transition Year is perceived as beneficial to student wellbeing for the specific reason that it is perceived to be a break from post-primary assessment, which defines the other post-primary years.

> I think most did TY just to, like, take a break, breathe, and relax, and, like, find themselves properly.
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)1F)

> I'm just relieved we have Transition Year before it. I would not like to have to go straight into Leaving Cert. I think they need a year, you know, to develop other interests.
> (Parent3)

Transition Year is perceived as a year which directly restores balance for students, due to the absence of assessment. It is noted that Transition-Year places are not always available for students. Indeed, student places for this year in post-primary are highly coveted (DES, 2016g).

The impact of achievement: Conclusion

This section outlined stakeholder perceptions in relation to wellbeing and the impact of achievement. Where wellbeing is concerned, policymakers and students/parents were aligned in their perspectives about the importance of student health. However, the current culture of assessment, which has developed in line with the perceived purpose of assessment, impacts on post-primary students to the extent that wellbeing is considerably affected. In addition to the benefit of assessment contributing to individual development

as addressed in relation to Theme One, simultaneous challenges exist within the system. Competition and pressure to achieve affect the wellbeing of students, who used negative language, such as ‘degrading’, ‘not good enough’ and ‘cost’ when discussing the impact of achievement through post-primary assessment on personal wellbeing. Within the post-primary system, Transition Year is identified as a welcome refuge from the system of assessment which takes place in all other years.

From a functionalist perspective, it is clear that students, in particular, are reporting toxic levels of pressure where achievement is concerned. It is this voice of dissatisfaction that will drive change within the post-primary system. However, if student voice is neither enabled nor empowered, a functionalist view of the system indicates that reform will not take place and that the established system will continue. Hence, it is proposed that the empowerment of stakeholder voice is key to reform.

This research seeks to understand the perspectives of stakeholders in a case study school during a period of simultaneous continuity and reform. In discussing the local school assessments, it was clear that the system of local assessment was well-established, with three main assessments dominating discussion in the focus groups. While stakeholders acknowledged the importance of assessment, as outlined in relation to Theme One, the culture of assessment was generally observed by stakeholders to be challenging in relation to local school assessments. The entrance assessment, for example, is characterised by an absence of information, and it is undertaken by students who are unaware of its purpose, have not been previously exposed to the content and who are subjected to a large-scale formal assessment as their first assessment in post-primary education. For parents, there is an absence of information, which leads to confusion as to the purpose and outcome of this assessment. It was not the role of the researcher to inform parents and students of the purpose of the assessment and the use of assessment data. However, it is proposed that an increased awareness of the purpose of the assessment would impact on the culture of the assessment. The Christmas and February assessments are perceived as summative experiences by stakeholders, and the primary benefit of the assessments is communication by way of a report following the assessment. Hence, it is interesting that an absence of culture around the communication on the entrance assessment is not consistent with the subsequent culture of communication on subsequent post-primary assessment. Indeed, it is perceived that planned reporting provides a purpose for the Christmas and February assessments in line with the summative purpose of the assessments discussed in relation to Theme One.

In applying a functionalist lens to assessment in the post-primary school, it is evident that the culture of assessment is such that each post-primary assessment provides summative information on the learning of a student, which prepares stakeholders in terms of the final post-primary assessment, the Leaving Certificate. In this way, the frequency of assessment and reporting post-assessment provide stability to the education system. Stakeholders remain informed as to how they/their child are/is performing within the system; this provides accountability, as discussed in relation to Theme One. Hence, it is proposed that post-primary assessment provides order and consistency of approach in the short term, which benefits the system in the long term, as all stakeholders prepare for the final assessment. The entrance assessment, however, is an anomaly for students and parents. While teachers are aware of the functionality of this assessment, students and parents are not. Nonetheless, students sit the assessment and parents are aware that it occurs. In the absence of knowledge and communication about this assessment, stakeholders continue to partake in this assessment. This indicates a trust in the culture of the school on behalf of stakeholders, where assessment is concerned.

6.6.2 Student voice

As noted, the inclusion of stakeholder voice with regard to wellbeing will be central to reform. Indeed, the Director of Assessment (NCCA) recognised stakeholder voice is catered for in terms of the logistics of policy-making at a national level:

> in terms of a representative or a consultative way of working,
> the structures lend themselves to that kind of open approach.
> (Director of Assessment, NCCA)

This section represents the perceived inclusion of student voice as experienced by students in the case study school. It explores the empirical data in relation to the following elements which arose during thematic analysis of the focus group data:

(i) current inclusion of student voice within the system

(ii) student voice: an instrument of reform.

Each of the three elements are discussed in this section drawing on all of the empirical data where relevant.

Current inclusion of student voice within the system

Early in the focus group process, it became evident that the concept of 'student voice' was not readily understood by all students. Students in the junior years (First Year and Second Year), in particular, believed that student voice was limited to informing a teacher of whether he/she understood an element of class content by raising their hand to affirm they understood. Older students, however, were clearer on the concept of student voice and they perceived an absence of it. Within the Third-Year focus group, an English poem was referenced by a student to highlight his perceived situation:

> we're just […] 'birds in cages' […] they just don't really care about your opinion.
> (3rdYrStudent2M)

Senior Cycle students were exceptionally vocal about their perceived lack of voice with regard to assessment and other aspects of school life. Students discussed this absence of voice with reference to the classroom, the wider school community, and the student council.

> why are student voices being disregarded? […] they should listen to students in order to understand how to make school better for students.
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)2M)

> nobody wants to listen.
> (6thYrStudent1M)

> I feel my voice is not heard, and I feel the voices of all the people around me are not heard […] Student opinions are not cared about.
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)2M)

Hence it is noted that the students of the case study school experience difficulty in relation to their voice being heard. They feel that they are 'caged' and that nobody wants to listen. This perceived lack of freedom of expression impacts on wellbeing particularly where assessment related issues are concerned. One example of an assessment and student-voice related limitation is that of the assessment marking scheme for Leaving Certificate. During the focus groups, Senior Cycle students explained that, when asked for their personal opinion/reflection in an assessment, they purposefully provide answers they perceive to be desirable to the assessor in line with the anticipated marking scheme. Students report they withhold their own true voice and opinion in favour of the anticipated correct answer:

> The marking scheme is very rigid. You're kind of just writing what they want.
> (6thYrStudent1F)

> You want to say exactly what they want to hear.
> (6thYrStudent2F)

Hence, the perceived importance of summative assessment (as discussed above and in relation to the purpose of assessment as outlined in Theme One and the subsequent culture of assessment as outlined in Theme Two) impacts directly on true student voice within the system. The perceived lack of freedom of voice is difficult for students, and it impacts on wellbeing to the extent that students describe feeling like 'birds in cages.' Linked to this issue, students expressed a lack of opportunity, and therefore courage, with regard to expressing their true opinions. In addition, in relation to wellbeing, students expressed a lack of inclusion and a lack of confidence as a result of the current culture:

> Even if teachers gave us the opportunity to speak our voice in front of the whole school, so many people would be scared to.
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)1F)

Hence, it is proposed that students perceive a lack of empowerment, opportunity, and skill where student voice is concerned within the case study school. Simultaneously however, during the focus groups, students described examples of how they would reform the system.

Student voice: An instrument of reform

Throughout the focus groups, students offered opinions on how positive change could be integrated to the system of post-primary assessment in Ireland. Reform is needed, in the perspectives of students. For example, a clear priority for students is that of choice within the system, both in terms of the subjects they may choose and also in terms of the means of assessment available. The need for reform extends to the organisation and culture of both national (state) and local (school-based) assessments.

> we all have things that we're really good at, but half the time in school, you're never able to let it out […] you're just told what you need to know, but it's like, we don't actually get any freedom to try to tell people what we actually do know and what we can do.
> (2ndYrStudent2M)

This Second-Year students describes a desired system which would facilitate 'letting it out,' being facilitated to release his potential, through the post-primary Irish education system within which he is currently limited. Similar to the Third-Year focus group wherein the metaphor of 'birds in cages' was discussed, Second-Year students also perceive a lack of freedom. This is a challenge for the Irish post-primary policymakers in terms of large-scale systematic reform. Within the focus groups, students identified that the inclusion of continuous assessment within the system would relieve pressure for them. Indeed, students across all year groups were united in their understanding and awareness of the impact a 'bad day' can have on assessment results. Students expressed a strong and united voice regarding distributing high-stakes assessments in particular, in order to systematically absorb the challenge of a once-off 'bad day' which would relieve pressure and enhance wellbeing:

> 'cause sometimes, you do just have a bad day. Sometimes, things just don't turn out like you'd have thought they would.
> (1stYrStudent3F)

> I don't think it's good just to rely on the exam, because that's just one day, you know. You could be off that day, you know. I think it's important, like, that they have an average.
> (TYStudent3M)

Indeed, it was observed during the focus group that students feel they have a valid contribution to make in terms of how best to change the culture of assessment in order to directly improve the wellbeing of students within the system. Throughout each focus group, students expressed themselves very clearly and demonstrated reflective and considered perspectives where post-primary assessment is concerned. Students provided multiple suggestions regarding assessment management. For example, regarding the time management and organisation of assessment, the following comment was offered:

> It would almost be better if we did the CBAs in Second Year, when the others were having their February or their summer exams, because then, like, instead of that, it would be block classes for the CBAs; you'd just get it done.
> (3rdYrStudent1M)

Parents agree that scheduling is sometimes a challenge:

> The scheduling sometimes can be difficult.
> (Parent2)

This comment demonstrates that perhaps this Third-Year student has a valid point and a pragmatic solution to the scheduling of assessments within the case study school.

In addition to reform to the schedule of assessments in the case study school, students would opt to reform the curriculum and the subsequent processes of assessment in order to provide 'life skills.' Students described an ideal assessment situation as one which would formatively develop students as active and aware global citizens. Students provided sentiments such as the following:

> You're just a number, at the end of the day. To the system, you're just a number.
> (6thYrStudent2F)

> school doesn't show the bad things in life; they just tell you, 'Oh, you gotta work, work; if you keep working, life will be perfect'; but they don't tell you about the downfalls in life, like the things that aren't your fault kinda thing.
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)1F)

> students need to be equipped to deal with mental health issues; they need to be equipped to deal with, like, life issues and things that come up.
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)2M)

Hence, the empirical data showed that students would opt for reform with regard to the pragmatic issues of frequency, timing, and content of assessment as discussed above. A fourth issue of reform as identified by both parents and students was that of the nature of reporting. As illustrated in Table 37, a majority of students and parents agree that assessment results are important to demonstrate the learning of a student.

Table 37: 'Assessment results are important to show my parents how much I have learned.' Or for Parents: 'Assessment results are important to show me how much my child has learned' (by stakeholder group)

Stakeholder Group		***Agree***	***Indifferent***	***Disagree***
Students	*Count*	79	47	54
	%	44%	26%	30%
Parents	*Count*	38	1	7
	%	82%	2%	16%
Total	*Count*	117	48	61
	%	52%	21%	27%

n=226 (180 students and 46 parents)

As illustrated in Table 37, the majority of students and parents perceive the importance of assessment results to demonstrate the extent of learning. However, it must be noted

that 56% of students and 18% of parents were either neutral towards this statement or disagreed. The focus group data provided an insight into this issue wherein all stakeholders noted a desire for a more qualitative approach to discussing and reporting summative results. For example, students stated they would like to discuss assessments and convey their opinions to a teacher. However, students felt this could not be facilitated in the current system:

> if you do that, you're just digging yourself a hole, and you're getting in trouble for it […] It's just me being honest. For me, teachers disregard everything you say as cheek […] they don't care how I feel.
> (2ndYrStudent2M)

> when we're in here, we just have to box up everything, because we can't really just let it all out on the spot, 'cause, as I said, you get in trouble for it.
> (2ndYrStudent1M)

> Yeah, I think they actually get so pissed off if you say anything […] I feel like, if you speak up, you get, like, all your respect from teachers is lost.
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)3F)

Student voice on the issue of discussing summative results with teachers is perceived as 'cheek,' students feel they have to 'box up' their opinions as if they 'speak up' they lose their teachers' respect. Hence, in relation to Table 37, it is noted that summative results are important to students, however students desire reform at the level of engagement and discussion with teachers with regard to their results. In the focus group, parents expressed a similar desire for qualitative feedback on their children.

> I would love the opportunity, as a parent of a Third Year who is signed up to do Transition Year, to have a conversation with somebody who has seen my child in the school and who has kind of assessed in some ways other than her academic strengths and weaknesses, in areas that she could develop.
> (Parent4)

Holistic reporting on the overall development of the student together with teacher-student reflective discussion on summative results are desired by parents and students. This reformed approach would enhance processes within the system of post-primary assessment which, in turn, would promote student wellbeing. In summary, an overall desire for dialogue with the school was expressed by both parents and students. While students and parents express a desire for their voices and their concerns to be heard, they

would welcome, above all, meaningful dialogue with teachers about learning and all aspects of assessment, including but not limited to how they (or how their child) can best develop due to qualitative feedback on their assessment.

Indeed, when reflecting on the data gathered from stakeholders of the case study school, it is evident that stakeholders perceive the potential for considerable reform within the post-primary system of assessment in relation to curriculum, scheduling, frequency of assessments and reporting. However, stakeholder perceptions with regard to the potential for change within the system are not limited to the case study school The Director of Assessment (NCCA) explained that students in particular are 'strong' in their views, in his experience:

> There is a strong voice from students saying, 'Things need to change', strong voices expressing frustration with the system and a desire for things to change.
> (Director of Assessment, NCCA)

This research echoes the experience of the Director of Assessment. This research has found that students have strong views on reform within the system. However, students described an absence of an outlet for these views and explained they feel voiceless at the present time within their posy-primary experience:

> I'm just kind of sitting there, biding my time until I can leave.
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)3M)

> You're kind of expected just to shut up and get on with it.
> (6thYrStudent1M)

This perceived lack of voice and the associated 'shutting up' and 'biding of time' is detrimental to student wellbeing.

Student voice: Conclusion

This section outlined the empirical data gathered in this research with regard to student voice with regard to assessment within the post-primary system. In particular, this section discussed the current levels of inclusion of student voice within the case study school and the perceptions of students with regard to potential reform within the system.

At the time of research, students described that they felt limited in terms of their voice in general within the post-primary system. Students described that their voice is 'not heard' and their opinions are 'not cared about.' With regard to assessment, students described a

system whereby they purposely avoid providing their own opinions due to perceived rigidity within the marking scheme and trepidation about the perception that teachers would lose respect for students if they were to speak. Simultaneously however, students shared their opinions on potential reform within their post-primary assessment experience. Students suggested reform which they perceived would depressurise the system and result in enhanced wellbeing for themselves and their peers. Indeed, it is noted that, as discussed in Theme One, students perceive assessment as important. They wish to retain assessment within the system. However, they identify a need for reform with regard to assessment logistics including scheduling, life-skills and would like greater dialogue around the creation and reporting of results. In summary, students desire a true dialogue with the school and an atmosphere (or culture) which nourishes outward reflection: a system of assessment that is more student-centred than system centred.

6.6.3 Theme Three: Stakeholders perceive post-primary assessment has an impact on student wellbeing: Conclusion

Theme Three addressed the impact of post-primary assessment on student wellbeing in relation to the empirical data gathered in this research. This theme relates to the established purpose and culture of assessment as explored in relation to Theme One and Theme Two, respectively. As noted in the introduction to the theme, there is a strong awareness at a local level of wellbeing which was demonstrated in the presence of over 4000 people at a local 'From Darkness into Light' walk which took place during the same month as data collection for this research. In the context of this level of awareness, the overall picture of wellbeing for students in the case study school is one which is heavily impacted by post-primary assessment. Indeed, while Theme One was largely discussed by stakeholders in relation to the benefits of assessment, the theme of wellbeing was discussed in relation to the challenges of assessment. In particular, stakeholders noted that the pressure to achieve in assessment and the competition amongst peers for relative summative status created great pressure within the system wherein students prioritise achievement over balance and wellbeing. In addition, students note they have ideas for reform within the system of assessment. However, at the time of data collection, they perceived there was no avenue for their ideas nor their opinions within the case study school. This further impacts wellbeing whereby students are experiencing a perceived lack of freedom and of voice.

With regard to functionalism, this lack of satisfaction amongst students and the 'strong voices' that are evolving as a result of their experience, is indicative of a system which is in need of reform. The functionalist nature of the post-primary system of assessment is complex, however. As discussed in relation to Theme One, the system of assessment is functioning as an accepted mechanism for the distribution of educational and economic opportunity within society. Simultaneously however, a clear dissatisfaction within the system and the challenges to student wellbeing are not functional over the long term. As noted, one student captures the juxtaposition of the current predicament of the system of assessment perfectly with his comment:

> Assessment […] does do its job, but it's also, like, at what cost? At what cost, like? At what cost to your personal life experience?
> (5thYrStudent(didTY)2M)

Hence, through a functionalist lens, it is evident that the system of post-primary assessment needs to adjust and reform in order to support both purposes: the distribution of educational and economic opportunities and student wellbeing. This was also observed by the Director of Assessment (NCCA) who noted:

> Let's hold on to what makes the Irish education system valued, but let's take some, find some ways of taking some of the pressure and stress out of the system.
> (Director of Assessment, NCCA)

It is proposed, based on the qualitative data and the focus group discissions in this research that student voice in particular will be a key instrument of reform as students understand the need to support both purposes.

6.7 Chapter conclusion

This chapter outlines the empirical data gathered in this research in relation to the three identified research questions outlined in Chapter One:

- What is the perception of post-primary assessment among students and parents in a case study school in Ireland during a period of simultaneous continuity and reform?
- What are the benefits of assessment within a post-primary school?

- What are the challenges of assessment within a post-primary school?

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data resulted in the emergence of three interlinked themes:

- Theme 1: Stakeholders perceive assessment through the purpose of the assessment
- Theme 2: Stakeholders perceive assessment through the culture of assessment
- Theme 3: Stakeholders perceive that post-primary assessment has an impact on student wellbeing

The empirical findings of the qualitative research were presented through analysis of the above three themes. The empirical findings from the quantitative research are woven through each of the three identified themes, as appropriate. Prior to discussing the main findings of this empirical research, it is important to note that stakeholder voice was not always consistent on every issue. A spectrum of opinions was expressed by all stakeholders. However, in general, a majority, or overall, perspective emerged. This section provides an overall conclusion regarding the analysis of the empirical data for each of the three themes.

In relation to the perception of post-primary assessment among stakeholders in the case study school during a period of simultaneous continuity and reform, it is evident that benefits and challenges are perceived in relation to all elements. Stakeholders identified and agreed that assessment has a clear purpose within the post-primary system. In relation to the purpose of assessment, stakeholders perceived that assessment is important for supporting individual development, supporting accountability within the system and supporting the economic development of Ireland. Students and parents agreed that assessment belongs in post-primary education due to the multiple functions it serves. However, stakeholders also observed an 'anti-purpose' whereby some assessments were deemed to be without purpose. In particular, stakeholders perceived homogeneity within assessment as a challenge within the post-primary system. In addition, stakeholders acknowledged that significant learning can take place in the absence of assessment. Hence, in relation to the purpose of assessment, benefits and challenges have been identified. However, for stakeholders, the benefits outweigh the challenges as regards the purpose of assessment.

The culture of assessment, the second theme identified in this empirical research, identified that stakeholders perceived assessment through a cultural lens. Stakeholders

discussed national and local assessments, the combination of which combined to create the culture of assessment in the case study school. Stakeholders noted the reform of the Junior Cycle assessment, focusing on the classroom-based assessment in particular. While the benefits of this reformed assessment were acknowledged by stakeholders, continuity of the existing Senior Cycle system of assessment permeated and was deemed to impact negatively upon the implementation of the CBA. Summative assessment, despite Junior Cycle reform to the contrary, is prioritised by stakeholders in line with the purpose of assessment identified in Theme One. Summative assessment is perceived as very important by stakeholders in terms of the Leaving Certificate. In addition, the importance of summative assessment is visible through management's request for summative data where the benefits of LCVP are concerned. Indeed, it is noted that, while reform of the Junior Cycle has occurred, it has been introduced and implemented into a system of well-established local assessment which evolved in response to the traditional Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate continuum. Hence, it is proposed that the continuity of the established culture has had a greater impact on stakeholder perceptions than that of the culture surrounding reform. Indeed, stakeholders perceived local and national assessment through summative means, in line with the purpose of assessment as discussed in Theme One. This is a benefit where relative student ranking is concerned. However, it is a significant challenge for the continued implementation of reform at Junior Cycle level.

The third theme identified within the empirical data was the impact of post-primary assessment on student wellbeing. Stakeholders noted the impact of Theme One and Theme Two on student wellbeing. The purpose of assessment was perceived by stakeholders to promote a particular culture of assessment, one which enhanced competition between students, resulting in pressure. This focus on summative assessment, in the context of a competitive culture, impacts on imbalance and unhealthy choices, which directly impact student wellbeing. Interestingly, however, while the impact on student wellbeing is a considerable challenge to the current system of post-primary assessment, student voice is gathering strength in relation to this area. Students of all year groups expressed a consistency of opinion in terms of the impact of post-primary assessment on their wellbeing. In addition, a clear, united voice in terms of reform is evident. However, students perceived a current barrier concerning their perspectives on assessment. This further impacted wellbeing, as students referred to 'biding their time' in

post-primary education, awaiting their graduation in order to access their perceived 'freedom' from the system.

With regard to the functionalist theoretical perspective adopted for this research, it is noted that embedded within the structures of society are the structures of education, including assessment. The current system of post-primary assessment is fulfilling its duty in terms of providing a mechanism for students to access future opportunities. As discussed in Section 3.4.3, within a functionalist perspective, a system will continue to operate unless it no longer serves a community. Hence, it is proposed that the emerging student voice, particularly with regard to student wellbeing, may catalyse greater reform within the post-primary system of assessment. However, this will be explored further in Chapter Seven, which provides a reflective discussion of the findings presented in this chapter.

Chapter Seven: Discussion and recommendations

7.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to reflect on all aspects of the research detailed in Chapters One to Six. In order to effectively present all of the integral aspects of this post-graduate research, this chapter will present the findings of this research in relation to the three research questions introduced in Chapter One:

- What is the perception of post-primary assessment among students and parents in a case study school in Ireland during a period of simultaneous continuity and reform?
- What are the benefits of assessment within a post-primary school?
- What are the challenges of assessment within a post-primary school?

Through thematic analysis of the data presented in Chapter Six, three themes arose, and these provided a structure for discussion in Chapter Six:

Theme 1: Stakeholders perceive assessment through the purpose of the assessment

Theme 2: Stakeholders perceive assessment through the culture of assessment

Theme 3: Stakeholders perceive that post-primary assessment has an impact on student wellbeing.

Reflecting on the research questions in terms of the data gathered and outlined in Chapter Six, this chapter is structured as follows. Section 7.2 outlines reflections on this research, particularly with regard to the research limitations, in order to contextualise the subsequent discussions and recommendations. Section 7.3 discusses the benefits of assessments, while Section 7.4 discusses the challenges of assessment, and Section 7.5 outlines the culture of assessment, along with its impact on stakeholder perspectives during a period of continuity and reform. Following discussion with regard to the three research questions, key recommendations based on the findings of this research are presented in relation to the case study school (Section 7.6) and for policymakers in relation to the Irish post-primary system (Section 7.7).

7.2 Reflections on the challenges experienced

As noted in Section 5.2, a researcher should be actively reflective throughout the research process (Denscombe, 2010). During all phases of this research, the researcher maintained

a reflective approach. As a result, a small number of challenges were noted at different stages during the process. These challenges and limitations were experienced and observed in relation to the methodology, research design, data collection and data analysis aspects of this research, as outlined below.

The first challenge identified pertains to the methodology chosen for this research. As discussed in Section 5.2.4, a methodology describes the 'informed approach to the production of data' (Ellen, 1984, p.9). A case study methodology was chosen for this research, as it allows for empirical inquiry and enables a researcher to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Eisenhardt, 1989; Zainal, 2007; Yin, 2018). This research focused on one school as a revelatory case as regards the perspectives of stakeholders towards assessment (Creswell, 2014). A single case study is analogous to a once-off experiment. Hence, by its very nature, a single case study may not be representative of the greater population (Yin, 2018; Eisenhardt, 1989; Brown, 2011). However, as noted, and not withstanding this important issue, this case study analysis represents initial research in the area of assessment and stakeholder voice, and was conducted in order to respond to a gap in the literature (as discussed in Chapters Two and Three).

A second challenge identified during the data collection phase of this research arose due to the chosen methodology of a case study approach, which, in turn, impacted the original research design intended for this research. Originally, it was intended to implement an explanatory sequential research design which would have resulted in the quantitative data providing a foundation for further discussion in the focus groups. However, the case study school is a busy environment, and management requested that the research should be conducted with minimum disruption to daily activities. As a result, certain year groups were not available at particular times. A pragmatic approach allowed this research to be conducted in a practical and time-efficient manner within the case study school, with minimum disruption to the teaching, learning, management and other activities taking place in the post-primary school, as requested. The pragmatic and concurrent collection of data allowed the research to take place and gave rise to an integrated and aggregated presentation of the data, as discussed in Chapter Six.

The third challenge observed during this research also relates to data collection, and specifically relates to the participation and engagement of parents. It must be noted that the participation level of students in this research was high. Careful sampling of students yielded a wide range of diversity from the student population, and it resulted in inclusive

representation, as noted in Chapter Five. However, participation on behalf of parents, and the subsequent inclusion of parent voice, were not as successful. For example, the researcher was forced to resort to convenience sampling having intended to pursue stratified random sampling in order to facilitate a single parent focus group. It is noted that parent participation is problematic in many aspects of education, as discussed in relation to PACCS (2018) in Section 3.3. Hence, it is noted that the participation of parents is a national issue, and the difficulty in accessing parent voice during this research is indicative of what is occurring on a national level.

The final challenge identified relates to the presentation of data in this chapter in relation to the final discussion and recommendations of this research. In Chapter Six, it was noted that the range, levels of agreement/disagreement and proportionality of stakeholder voice with regard to each element of the research varies significantly. For example, Table 17 illustrates stakeholder answers to the statement 'Assessment tells an employer how capable I am' (or 'how capable my child is' in the parent survey). Answers to this survey question were spread almost exactly evenly across all possible answers, with approximately one quarter of respondents choosing 'agree', 'neutral', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' in equal measure. Hence, it is noted that all stakeholder perspectives occur along a continuum, which is a challenge in relation to the discussion of perspectives. For the purpose of this chapter, discussions are presented in relation to the findings in general, and it must be noted that a spectrum of stakeholder perspectives was reported on each issue.

In conclusion, it is noted that four main challenges were observed by the researcher in relation to this research conducted as a case study analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education through the evaluation of stakeholder perspectives. As noted in Section 5.1, this research intends to make a valid contribution to the body of knowledge which has been established previously in the areas of assessment and stakeholder voice (Brown, 2008; Hyland, 2011; Darmody, 2017; Fleming, 2013). Hence, notwithstanding the challenges as noted, drawing on the conceptual framework outlined in Chapter Five, reflective consideration was given to the creation of a pragmatic research design wherein all stages of the research were clearly and considerately applied in the case study school in order to result in well-founded revelatory observations and conclusions (Yin, 2018; Creswell, 2014).

7.3 Discussion: The benefits of assessment

This section discusses the second research question in particular, outlining the findings of this research in relation to the benefits of assessment. Thematic analysis of the data as outlined in Chapter Six indicates that stakeholders perceived the benefits of assessment to relate most generally to the purpose of assessment. Hence, in discussing the second research question, 'What are the benefits of assessment within a post-primary school?', a summary of the data relating to Theme One is presented. The findings are discussed in relation to previous empirical research, the wider literature and national policy developments where appropriate. Finally, the benefits of assessment are addressed with regard to functionalism, the theoretical perspective providing a lens for this research.

7.3.1 Benefits of assessment: Discussion of the findings

In relation to the identified theme 'Stakeholders perceive assessment through the purpose of the assessment', the following benefits of assessment were outlined in Section 6.4:

- Assessment supports the educational development of individuals.
- Assessment supports accountability within the post-primary system.
- Assessment supports economic development.

This section will address the three benefits of assessment in relation to the purpose of assessment as outlined above.

Assessment supports the educational development of individuals

A clear finding following this research is that stakeholders perceive post-primary assessment to be beneficial, as it supports students with their individual educational development. This was explored in Section 6.4, wherein one student, for example, explained that assessment 'shows you yourself what you can do if you put your mind to it'. Assessment is perceived to provide summative evidence of effort, motivation, and learning. The perceived importance of the role of assessment in the educational development of individuals echoes the findings of previous research and discussions in the wider literature (Cook, 1951; Gronlund, 1998: Brown, 2008; Harlen, 2005; Barnes et al., 2015). Previous empirical research found that teachers perceive assessment to be important for the individual development of students (Brown, 2008; Darmody, 2017). Hence, this research shows the perspectives of students and parents to be generally

aligned with teachers in this regard. However, this research found that there is a focus on the summative rather than the formative experience of assessment where individual development is concerned. This nourishes the contemporary culture of assessment in the case study school, which will be discussed in Sections 7.4 and 7.5.

With regard to Irish education policy, the Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate also recognises the importance of summative assessment data for the development of individuals within the system. As noted in Chapter One, many comments encouraging the connection between summative processes of assessment data and educational development are noted by the Inspectorate in various Inspectorate reports. For example, it is noted that,

> In order to continue to raise students' attainment, teachers should be provided with accurate and reliable baseline data in order to set specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound (SMART) targets. (Department of Education and Skills, 2018f, p.10)

Inspectorate evaluations and recommendations will impact on local policy, which, in turn, will influence practice, and therefore local culture.

Assessment supports accountability within the post-primary system

As noted above, Inspectorate recommendations place an emphasis on summative accountability through assessment data within the post-primary education system in Ireland. Assessment data is also recognised as an accepted and relevant measure of accountability of education from the perspective of stakeholders, as discussed in Section 6.4.3. Teachers confirmed the sentiment that 'The summative assessment at the end is the be-all and end-all,' as one teacher specifically stated. Previous empirical research on the Irish post-primary system of assessment also found that teachers are aware of, and impacted by, the summative purpose of assessment. For example, Darmody (2017) observed that teachers feel accountable in terms of assessment data relating to their classes. Similarly, assessment is understood by teachers to have a clear evaluative function (Taber et al., 2011). Indeed, Banks et al. (2018) identify that students perceive teachers who prepare them for the assessment as the best teachers.

The practice of utilising assessment data as a means of accountability on a local level mirrors practice on an international scale, where PISA assessment data is utilised to assess and compare global education systems. As noted in Chapter Four, the use of assessment data has 'global significance' (Grek, 2009, p.5) and is advantageous in terms of measuring

accountability within education systems. Indeed, in the case study school, 50% of stakeholders agreed or strongly agreed that assessment data provides information on how schools are doing (as illustrated in Table 18). The results were generally consistent across all sampled groups, including parents.

In short, while stakeholders acknowledged the helpfulness of assessment data for measuring accountability, it must be noted that the use of assessment data to support accountability within the system is also perceived as a challenge for stakeholders in relation to student wellbeing, as will be addressed in Section 7.4.

Assessment supports economic development

A third benefit of assessment as perceived by stakeholders is the acceptance of assessment data for certification and access to future opportunities. Post-primary assessments which take place prior to the Leaving Certificate are perceived as stepping stones to the Leaving Certificate, and the Leaving Certificate is perceived as a legitimate mechanism for the distribution of subsequent opportunities, as discussed in Section 6.4. Prior research has presented similar findings, as discussed in Chapter Two. For example, in her discussion paper titled 'Entry to higher education in Ireland in the 21st century', Hyland defines the Leaving Certificate assessment as a 'passport' to opportunity (2011, p.5). Similarly, in her research on nine post-primary systems around the world, O'Donnell (2018, p.33) found that, in all nine international systems, certificates are intended as a tool for access to opportunities. Indeed, as discussed in Section 3.2.2 with regard to the wider literature, summative assessment data is utilised in most countries as a means to a right of entry to further education and employment (Gardner, 2011; William, 2007). Hence, the wider literature is consistent in terms of the usefulness of assessment data for the support of economic development within the international landscape.

7.3.2 Benefits of assessment: Functionalism

In consideration of the findings discussed above, it is clear that assessment is perceived as beneficial, as it facilitates three identified processes which stakeholders deem to be important. At the level of the individual, assessment provides a summative account, and therefore a measure, of relative learning for stakeholders. This summative measure of learning is perceived by students, parents, teachers, and the Inspectorate as a helpful

indicator of individual educational development. Hence, accountability through assessment data provides a mechanism through which social order is maintained (Parsons, 1937; Raffo et al., 2010; Wilson, 2011). Stakeholders generally accept this functionalist nature of the system of post-primary assessment. For example, stakeholders reported success within the system ('Gives you power'), while the majority (58%) of students and parents perceived certification as an important part of post-primary education. This demonstrates that stakeholders generally believe in the processes of assessment and respect the philosophy behind post-primary assessment. Similarly, prior research on the nature of the post-primary system of assessment noted that the system is perceived as 'standardised for all, fair' (Banks et al., 2018, p.52), while NCCA researchers have observed 'the objective, fair and highly-regarded nature of the current examination system' (NCCA, 2018a, p.8.).

The role or purpose of a school, from a functionalist perspective, is to support social order and minimise the eruption of 'chaos' (Wilson, 2011, p.2). As noted above, school management analyses and presents assessment data to staff on the first day of the academic year. It is proposed that this presentation of summative assessment data is a means through which a tone and a focus for the academic year ahead is provided by senior management to the wider staff, thereby minimising the potential for chaos. Systematic reliance on data aligns with rationalised control (Ehren et al., 2015).

With regard to the macro-development of an economy, assessment has always played a general role where the division of labour is concerned (Durkheim, 1977, 2009). Systems of education must respond to the needs of industry to provide structured, defined and quality-assured training for a global workforce. Through post-primary assessment, individuals compete to access various opportunities (Banks and Smyth, 2015a). As we continue into the 21st century, assessment data continues to be utilised in many countries as a means to a right of entry to further education and employment (Gardner, 2011; William, 2007; Hyland, 2011). For Ireland, as noted in Chapter Two, the numbers attending higher education from post-primary education have increased significantly. An almost tenfold increase in those transitioning from post-primary to higher education since the 1960s is observed by the HEA (2018). This large-scale transition is supported by the CAO, and assessment data is central to this process. Indeed, assessment data has supported the systematic democratisation of educational opportunity. This allows the Irish system of education at large to respond effectively to the needs of industry by providing accessible and structured training for a global workforce.

7.3.3 Benefits of assessment: Conclusion

In this section, the identified research question 'What are the benefits of assessment within a post-primary school?' was discussed. In relation to the research findings, it is clear that the benefits of assessment are perceived by stakeholders through the purpose of assessment. While stakeholders did not use terms such as 'accountability' 'transparency' and 'quality assurance', as discussed in Chapter Two, they were clear in their perception that summative assessment makes students responsible for their learning. Similarly, stakeholders perceived a benefit of post-primary assessment as the process through which legitimate access to subsequent opportunity is achieved. Interestingly, however, the benefits of assessment as identified were found to simultaneously provoke challenges, as perceived by stakeholders, which will be explored in Section 7.4.

7.4 Discussion: The challenges of assessment

As noted in Section 7.1, this section discusses the third identified research question, 'What are the challenges of assessment within a post-primary school?', from the perspective of stakeholders. Thematic analysis of the data indicates that stakeholders perceive the challenges of assessment as relating in general to the impact of assessment on student wellbeing. Hence, in discussing this research question, a summary of the data relating to Theme Three is presented. Aspects relating to Themes One and Two are also referred to, as all three themes are interconnected, from the perspective of stakeholders, with regard to post-primary assessment. Prior empirical research, the wider literature and national policy developments are also referred to as appropriate. In order to conclude this section, the challenges of assessment are addressed with regard to the theoretical perspective of functionalism.

7.4.1 Challenges of assessment: Discussion of the findings with regard to previous research, literature and policy

This research identified four main challenges relating to post-primary assessment from the perspective of the stakeholders of the case study school:

1. A focus on summative assessment.
2. The perceived impact of post-primary assessment on the teacher and the subsequent impact on students.
3. An over-focus on the Leaving Certificate assessment.
4. Perceived homogeneity within the system of post-primary assessment.

Each of these four identified elements are discussed in this section. A final section noting the impact of these three elements on student wellbeing is then reflected upon.

A focus on summative assessment

The perception of a focus on summative assessment within the case study school has resulted in the system being characterised by perceived competition and pressure. One student concisely expressed what was evident in all focus groups in relation to assessment and wellbeing: 'assessment does do its job, but it's also, like, at what cost? At what cost, like? At what cost to your personal life experience?' As discussed in Chapter Three, the OECD's 'Education 2030' outlines a philosophy which requires contemporary systems of education, including systems of application for educational opportunity, to be student-centred (OECD, 2020). The system within the case study school is not yet perceived as student-centred, due to perceived competition and achievement-related pressure. It is proposed that assessment is perceived as so important by students as a summative representation of their ability to compete for opportunity that they focus on it as a priority irrespective of the impact on their wellbeing. This is evident in terms of previous empirical research on the post-primary system of assessment, as explored in Chapter Two. For example, in their research on the Irish post-primary system, Banks and Smyth (2015) also observed that stress was often linked to fears of not achieving academic goals. In addition, students perceive assessment as such a high priority that it results in feelings of apprehension and fear (Banks et al., 2018). The NCCA also reports that stakeholders are concerned about the academic workload of post-primary students and the pressures relating to assessment performance (NCCA, 2018a). Hence, it is clear that the impact of competition and the pressure to achieve is a well-recognised challenge in the contemporary Irish post-primary system for students in terms of student wellbeing. This is not limited to the Irish post-primary system, as Baird et al. (2014) observe that feelings of stress are fundamental to any high-stakes system.

The perceived impact of post-primary assessment on the teacher

Assessment was perceived by stakeholders to pose a challenge to the student-teacher relationship. One student noted that teachers were 'our first point of contact with the education system' (as discussed in Section 6.5). This demonstrates the perceived importance of the role of the teacher. However, an identified challenge of assessment within the case study school is that teachers seem to be pressurised in relation to assessment. As noted by one student, 'the teachers are under pressure' (as discussed in Section 6.4.3). This was evident throughout all focus groups, whereby stakeholders expressed the perception that teachers feel accountable in terms of assessment results. This finding echoes an observation on behalf of the Inspectorate, which noted, within the 2016 WSE/MLL Inspection Report, that classroom teaching in the case study school was 'delivered in a manner that was overly examination-focused' (DES, 2016g, p.7). However, this approach to assessment is not limited to the case study school. Previous empirical research has found that post-primary assessment in Ireland impacts on, and is perceived as a challenge by, teachers (Darmody, 2017; Taber et al., 2011; Banks and Smith, 2015). Indeed, the impact of pressure on assessment has been found to impact teachers working in other sectors of the Irish education system (O'Leary et al., 2019). This research found that the pressure on teachers can impact on students, as discussed in Section 6.4.3. This was also evident in previous empirical research undertaken by the ESRI (Banks et al., 2018).

An over-focus on the Leaving Certificate assessment

As discussed in Chapter Six in relation to the purpose of assessment, the Leaving Certificate is regarded by stakeholders as a high-stakes assessment. A strong perception of the high-stakes nature of the assessment was described by students, who noted statements such as the following: 'If you don't get high points in your Leaving Cert, then that's your life over', and 'if I fail, that it will be the end of the world'. Hence, while the Leaving Certificate is perceived as a beneficial post-primary assessment in relation to its purpose, it is simultaneously perceived by students to be a significant challenge.

Indeed, previous empirical research on the Irish post-primary system of assessment also found an acute awareness in post-primary school of the Leaving Certificate assessment,

which is a challenge for stakeholders. For example, Banks et al. (2018, p.36) found that the Leaving Certificate was described by students as 'intimidating', given the perceived influence of the Leaving Certificate exam in deciding one's 'whole career' (Banks et al., 2018, p.36). In addition, NCCA research on the Senior Cycle has observed an 'excessive exam focus leading to stress and anxiety' (2018, p.11). This research found that 59% of all stakeholders, including Junior Cycle students and parents, indicated that they felt 'extremely nervous' when thinking about the Leaving Certificate (Table 28). This feeling was not limited to Senior Cycle students who were approaching the assessment; Table 29 displayed the relative proportionality of 1st- and 6th-Year students who were 'extremely nervous', and it is noted that the returned answers were almost exactly the same for both groups.

Perceived homogeneity within the system of post-primary assessment

With regard to the identified benefits of assessment discussed in Section 7.3, it is clear that stakeholders understood the functionality of the system and perceived the defined summative processes for accessing opportunities as generally acceptable. Simultaneously, however, unfairness within the system was perceived and noted by stakeholders as a challenge. In the first instance, in relation to the purpose of assessment, it is noted that stakeholders are aware that not every assessment has an accepted 'purpose'. As discussed in Section 6.4.4 with regard to the 'anti-purpose' of assessment, the homogeneity of post-primary assessment is problematic for stakeholders. The empirical data showed that stakeholders in the case study school held negative opinions towards certain features of assessment, including the perceived lack of fairness and equality in the range of assessments available. One parent noted, for example, 'I would like to see the education system cater better for a broader spectrum of individuals', while a Third-Year student commented, 'They need to be focused more on you and your individual skills. Like, that would be fairer'. Previous research on assessment in Irish post-primary education came to similar conclusions. Hyland (2011), for example, argues that the Leaving Certificate assessment is neither a fair nor an equitable examination, as students who excel linguistically and logically are at a significant advantage. In addition, Banks et al. (2018, p.20) found a 'need for a greater variety' within the system. Baird et al. (2014) agree that homogeneity exists to a large extent within the contemporary Irish post-primary system. In addition, the providers of the psychometric test CAT4 identify that spatial ability and non-verbal reasoning assessments are 'undervalued and

underassessed in schools' (GL Assessment, 2020, p.7). It is interesting to note that Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (2006) is accepted as relevant for teaching and learning, and it is referenced by the Professional Development Service for Teachers in Ireland (PDST, 2016). However, this acceptance of relevance is not perceived within the system of post-primary assessment. Hence, while the 'fairness' of the system was recognised in relation to the benefit of assessment as discussed in Section 7.3, a simultaneous 'unfairness' is perceived within the system of assessment in relation to what is assessed, and how.

7.4.2 The impact of assessment-related challenges on student wellbeing

Summative assessment was perceived by stakeholders to characterise post-primary assessment at the time of data collection despite the reform of the Junior Cycle system of assessment. Summative assessment was perceived both as a benefit of assessment, as discussed in Section 7.3, and as a challenge for stakeholders, as discussed above. Each of the challenges outlined reportedly impacted on student wellbeing, from the perspective of stakeholders. Specifically, stakeholders reported the absence of a work-life balance due to an overbearing assessment-driven workload. The absence of a healthy work-life balance is evident in previous contemporary research on the Irish system. For example, in the review of the Senior Cycle, parents highlighted the problematic nature of the overall demands placed on students, with the workload understood as being 'excessive' (Banks et al., 2018, p.53). Research carried out by Banks et al. (2018, p.53) also highlighted parents' concerns about the emphasis on assessment and its impact on students' wellbeing. Additional research by Banks and Smith (2015) further supports the proposition that young people need to spend less time on leisure activities due to their schooling and assessments. The *NCCA Senior Cycle Review Publication* (2018, p.10) reported that parents are concerned that their children struggle to maintain personal interests, leisure activities, sports participation and part-time work during the Senior Cycle, while students indicated that the workload of the Senior Cycle resulted in a lack of free time for extra-curricular activities, social interactions and, in some cases, sleep. Within this research, stakeholders also perceived that assessment preparation took precedence: 'you don't get to see your friends as much, or, like, being involved with your family, it's just all school stuff, and it just affects you really negatively'. The exact link between assessment and poor mental health/wellbeing was not the focus of this research. However, with contemporary empirical research consistently connecting assessment and

wellbeing, as discussed in Chapter Six, this is an area that must be explored further for the benefit of Irish society into the future, as young adults report more depressive symptoms than their mothers (GUI, 2019c, p.3), while 33% of young men and 40% of young women are classified as either overweight or obese (GUI, 2019d, p.5). If the system of post-primary assessment is contributing to these statistics, reform within the system must occur.

As a final point, in relation to the challenges of assessment and wellbeing, it is noted in this research that parents were aware of pressure within the system, along with the subsequent impact on student wellbeing. However, the empirical data highlighted that parents perceived their own children as being relatively free from stress ('Well, mine isn't [stressed]'). This highlights the possibility that parents may not be entirely in tune with how their own children are feeling. Further research in this area will ascertain whether parents are in touch with how their own children are feeling about assessment.

7.4.3 Challenges of assessment through a functionalist lens

In order to gain a full understanding of assessment, 'we need to comprehend the function or social needs it serves in our social system' (Wilson, 2011, p.2). The perceived benefits of post-primary assessment were discussed in Section 7.3, and stakeholder perceptions with regard to the challenges of assessment were discussed in this section. The benefits and challenges perceived and described by stakeholders are connected, as the perceived benefits of the purpose of assessment are perceived as a challenge in terms the impact on wellbeing.

It is proposed that the summative processes involved for Leaving Certificate students with regard to the CAO permeates the system at large, as discussed in relation to the benefits of assessment and Theme One. As a result, an over-focus on the Leaving Certificate as the mechanism through which opportunities are accessed is evident. Indeed, Banks et al. observe that students believe the Leaving Certificate in its current and established form to be solely a mechanism to 'get into college', after which, as an assessment, it is 'meaningless' (Banks et al., 2018, p.35). The perceived and accepted function of the Leaving Certificate is that of a mechanism for the segregation and selection of students. However, the system is not functioning well at the level of the individual in terms of wellbeing. While prior research on the nature of the post-primary system of assessment noted that the system was perceived as being 'standardised for all, fair' (Banks et al.,

2018, p.52), it is also observed that a contradiction appears within the wider literature. In relation to the challenges of assessment discussed above, unfairness is evident within the system of post-primary assessment in Ireland. Although the system is functioning as described in Section 7.3.2, dysfunctionality in terms of inequality is also apparent. The description of assessment as 'memory'-orientated and 'meaningless', as noted in this section, is also problematic from a functionalist theoretical perspective where 21st-century employment opportunities and skill requirements are concerned. These are considerable challenges for a system of assessment which must evolve to maintain equilibrium, functionality, and a general status quo (Durkheim, 1953; 1977).

7.4.4 Challenges of assessment: Conclusion

This section discusses the empirical data gathered in this research with regard to the third identified research question, 'What are the challenges of assessment within a post-primary school?'. Thematic analysis of the data as outlined in Chapter Six indicates that stakeholders perceive the challenges of assessment to generally relate to the impact of assessment on student wellbeing.

Each of the challenges identified in the empirical data were discussed in relation to the research findings in the context of previous research, the wider literature and, where relevant, educational publications and policy. From a functionalist perspective, it is clear that cracks within the post-primary system of assessment are emerging, according to stakeholders, especially students. The impact of assessment on student wellbeing is causing stakeholders to question the functionality of the system, a system which must evolve in order to meet the identified needs of society. Hence, it is concluded that while the benefits of post-primary assessment are readily perceived, as discussed in Section 7.3, considerable challenges to wellbeing are also perceived within the system. Systematic reform may be required in order to adjust the system to minimise the identified challenges, depending on the level of dissatisfaction or disfunction of the system, which will be discussed in relation to the culture of assessment in Section 7.5.

7.5 Discussion: Stakeholder perspectives towards assessment

This section discusses the main research question, 'What is the perception of post-primary assessment by students and parents in a case study school in Ireland during a period of

continuity and reform?'. Thematic analysis of the data indicates that stakeholders perceived the benefits and the challenges of assessment to impact on their perceptions of post-primary assessment, as discussed in Sections 7.3 and 7.4, respectively. However, this research has found that the culture of assessment is of primary importance for stakeholders with regard to their perceptions during a period of continuity and reform. This section addresses the culture of assessment in the case study school with regard to the existing culture, as perceived by stakeholders (introduced in relation to Theme One in Section 7.3) and the identified need for reform, as identified by stakeholders (discussed in relation to Theme Three in Section 7.4).

7.5.1 Perspectives of assessment: Discussion of the findings with regard to previous research; a review of the literature and policy

In order to discuss the existing culture within the case study school, the reader is reminded of the main points made in relation to the purpose of assessment as discussed in Section 7.3. Stakeholders perceived many benefits within the current system of assessment. In particular, the benefits of assessment were perceived with regard to the production of summative data upon which stakeholders can reflect in order to identify and understand achievement and accountability within the system. Linking the benefits with the challenges of assessment discussed in Section 7.4, the summative aspect which was perceived as of benefit to stakeholders in relation to the purpose of assessment was perceived as problematic for student wellbeing. This leads to a complex situation whereby stakeholders simultaneously recognise the benefits of the current system but also desire reform. Continuity and reform are discussed in this section in relation to the culture of the current system.

The culture of reporting

Stakeholders perceived reporting as an important aspect of post-primary education. As one parent noted in the focus groups, she perceived assessment to be positive, as 'It's what we get feedback on' (Section 6.5.2). Similarly, a significant link between the relationship of assessment and reporting was identified through the survey, whereby, as illustrated in Table 32, a strong cohort of students and a large proportion of parents agreed that teachers assess students due to reporting responsibilities. This is interesting regarding

the perceived purpose of assessment, as discussed in relation to Theme One. It is proposed that the desire for feedback on their sons and daughters creates a need for reporting, and therefore a purpose for assessment, within the case study school. This, in turn, nourishes and promotes a culture of continuous summative assessment. However, parents expressed a desire for more qualitative feedback, rather than summative feedback, on their children. For example, one parent explained that she 'would love the opportunity […] to have a conversation with somebody who has seen my child in the school and who has kind of assessed in some ways other than her academic strengths and weaknesses, in areas that she could develop'. The requirement for reporting is defined at a national level; The Education Act (1998) requires schools to 'regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents' (GOI, 1998, p.23). Based on the findings of this research, it is clear that an established system of summative reporting is in existence in the case study school due to the requirements of the Education Act. However, stakeholders would welcome a more holistic approach to reporting. The desire on behalf of stakeholders for more holistic feedback on student development is recognised by commercial companies, one of which observes that parents 'will naturally be interested in all aspects' of a child's development (GL Assessment, 2010, p.129). It is proposed that a shift away from summative evaluation is not only desired by stakeholders but would be beneficial for students in relation to the challenges of assessment discussed in Section 7.3.

The culture and perception of 'success'

The focus on summative results and the perception of success as perceived by stakeholders in the case study school causes an unnecessary continuous focus on summative grades. However, a large cohort of students will not ultimately rely on summative assessment grades for access to their future opportunities and training. Data from the GUI research indicates that 38% of Irish 20-year-olds are not attending further/higher education (GUI, 2019, p.3). This statistic is relatively consistent with other related research on the Irish system, such as that of Hyland (2011), who observes that the number of entrants from post-primary to higher education in Ireland in 2010 equated to approximately 65% of the cohort. Hence, it is evident that approximately 35% of students are not directly relying on their summative Leaving Certificate assessment results for access to post-Leaving Certificate opportunity. This 35% may access other opportunities, such as apprenticeships or employment prospects, for which a broader spectrum and

process of application is required. Hence, the perception of 'success' in terms of summative data outlined in Section 7.3 requires reform. As noted in Chapter Three, Junior Cycle assessment now includes achievement of an ordinal categorical type on the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA) (DES, 2015b). However, this descriptor has been criticised by stakeholders, as the dominant culture of summative assessment endures. Hence, larger-scale reform is required in order to change the narrative of success in the case study school. This will, in turn, impact all elements relating to the system of post-primary assessment, including, for example, the grinds industry. If the definition and perception of 'success' were to undergo sincere and large-scale reform within the post-primary system of assessment, perhaps the pressure to invest in the grinds industry, as noted by parents in Section 6.5.3, would not be as significant. Indeed, as noted in Chapter Three, the grinds industry in Ireland is reportedly worth between €20 and €50 million per year (Murphy, 2012b; Newenham, 2013). It is estimated that 45% of students receive private tutoring in their last year of school (Smyth, 2009). However, OECD (2005, p.3), for example, recognises that 'success in life' requires more than knowledge and skills in reading, mathematics, and memory recall. During the NCCA initial public consultation on the Senior Cycle, parents were asked to explain their perception of success in the Senior Cycle (Banks et al., 2018). In their responses, parents focused on the importance of personal happiness and their son/daughter 'developing into a confident, well-rounded and positive person' (Banks et al., 2018, p.57). This is consistent with, and further emphasises, the perspectives of parents in relation to their desire for holistic reporting, as discussed in the 'culture of reporting' section above. Large-scale systematic changes with regard to the definition of success would impact significantly on the perceptions of post-primary assessment.

The culture of continuity, and its impact on reform

In relation to Junior Cycle reform, stakeholders perceived that classroom-based assessment can be a positive experience which enables students to

(i) actively learn through the assessment task

(ii) learn from and through interacting with others

(iii) improve their confidence

However, while some stakeholders experienced the benefits of the reformed assessment, many stakeholders reported varying levels of satisfaction with the CBA in terms of it being a 'student-friendly' addition to post-primary education. In addition, perceived inconsistency in the administration and management of CBAs by teachers was observed by stakeholders. These observations and reported experiences of stakeholders towards the CBA are not in line with the vision outlined in policy and framework documents, as discussed in Chapter Four, where the philosophy providing the foundation of the assessment is that it is part of the ebb and flow of formative learning and classroom management (DES, 2012a; NCCA, 2015). Indeed, while the positive aspects of the reformed assessment have been recognised, the empirical data also shows cynicism; as one parent noted, 'our family would be very cynical about the value of CBAs'. The parent subsequently reflected that 'the amount of work is disproportionate to the benefit […] it is absolutely disproportionate to what ends up being a comment on the certificate, at the end of the day'. It is proposed that this quote from a parent reflects the problematic nature of reform in the context of continuity. The cynicism expressed about the CBA is contextualised as a result of the lack of summative evaluation and the absence of perceived meaning in terms of the descriptor result.

The culture of inclusion

As presented in Chapter Six and discussed in Section 7.3, an established culture of summative performance is evident in the case study school. For example, the importance of summative assessment is evident in the statistical presentation of assessment results to teachers on the first day of term (Figure 11), and students perceived that teachers also focus on summative assessment, with the result that they are 'under pressure' (as discussed in Section 6.4). In addition, the narrative surrounding the Leaving Certificate in particular depicts a culture whereby summative assessment is perceived as extremely important: 'if I fail, that it will be the end of the world'. Simultaneously, however, a culture of concern around student wellbeing exists, and students describe a context where, as one student noted, 'I'm just kind of sitting there, biding my time until I can leave' and where they are 'expected just to shut up and get on with it', as another student (detailed in Section 6.6.2). It is thereby proposed that the culture surrounding assessment needs to be reformed.

Webber et al. (2014) note that student voice is not generally considered in the logistics of assessment. A change of culture is required whereby the emergence and subsequent integration of student voice in particular will have an impact on the system of assessment within the case study school. It is expected that this, in turn, will have a positive impact on student wellbeing. During this research, the researcher noted that students were eager to participate. This is evident in the almost 100% completion of the student surveys and the participation levels in focus groups. There was one exception. Ironically, Sixth-Year students were the only group of students reluctant to take part in the focus groups, due to, as they explained, the demands of the concurrent Leaving Certificate Oral Assessment. It is interesting that the state assessment impacted on student participation in this way, which further demonstrates the point that assessment takes priority over other activities, as discussed in relation to wellbeing. Indeed, it is found that students want their opinions to be heard. This is typical of the 21st-century generation, as noted in the 'Growing Up in Ireland' research (2019), which found that young people in Ireland have strong opinions and that they seek to actively participate in discussion and planning (GUI, 2019). The Irish Second Level Students Union (ISSU) argues that students are best placed to articulate and represent their own views, and that they should be partners in the realisation of their journey through education (2010). Regarding national policy, student voice is actively incorporated into areas of reform such as the Senior Cycle review (NCCA, 2018). It is proposed that an active culture of inclusion would have a marked impact on student wellbeing without eliminating post-primary assessment. This is also recognised in previous empirical research on stakeholder voice which observes that the inclusion of student voice is linked with wellbeing, as it promotes 'positive findings in the context of relationships, pedagogical change and students' engagement, participation and achievement' (Fleming, 2013, p.viii).

7.5.2 Perspectives of assessment: Functionalism

This research has adopted a holistic requisite analysis approach to describe social situations (Turner and Maryanski, 1979). In describing the social situations that arise with regard to assessment in Irish post-primary education, a complex relationship between the culture of continuity of assessment and a need for reform is evident from the perceptions of stakeholders. Indeed, stakeholders described a situation whereby they were satisfied that there were identified benefits in relation to assessment (as discussed in Section 7.5), while simultaneously recognising the challenges presented by the same system (as

discussed in Section 7.4). As noted above, in relation to the culture of continuity and its impact on reform, stakeholders found themselves navigating a system of varied assessments, and perceiving them in relation to the established culture of assessment, which results in a cynical approach to reform. It is proposed that teachers have a role in maintaining the established system of assessment. Teachers agreed that a cultural shift must take place within the system of assessment. However, they did not view themselves as integral to that process:

> Teacher3: I talk about changing mind-sets, but I don't know how that will come about […] It's not our role.
>
> Teacher2: No.

This may demonstrate that teachers are reluctant to take the responsibility for cultural reform with regard to the post-primary system of assessment. Indeed, with regard to the Junior Cycle, previous research has noted that 'a much greater level of resistance and disquiet' among teachers was experienced than policy-makers might have anticipated' (Darmody, 2017, p.1). This indicates that the established system of education was functioning where teachers where concerned, and reform was resisted. To this end, students described a system whereby assessment was utilised by teachers as a tool for enhancing social order within the classroom:

> 2ndYrStudent3M: If someone gets, like, 98% in a test, they get them to come up to the top of the room, and then if the lowest was […] 20, they say that person's name. I mean, that's just, like, degrading.
>
> 5thYrStudent(noTY)2F: The first day we came into Fifth Year, my biology teacher sat us down and said, 'Right, now you have to do your Leaving Cert'.

Hence, it is proposed, in line with functionalist theory, that while dissatisfaction with the post-primary system of assessment was expressed by stakeholders, the established system functions for those teaching within the system as a means to promote and control social order. It is anticipated, however, due to the extent of dissatisfaction with the system expressed by stakeholders, that greater inclusion of stakeholder voice, which is scheduled to be enhanced through the 'Student and Parent Charter Bill' outlined in Chapter Four, may impact significantly on the established system of assessment and catalyse further reform. Indeed, it is proposed that significant reform within the post-primary system of assessment will need to be catalysed by the integration of student voice, a voice which is, in the perceptions of students, not adequately heard with regard to the current system in the case study school.

7.5.3 Perspectives of assessment: Conclusion

This section explored perceptions of post-primary assessment among students and parents in a case study school in Ireland during a period of reform. It identified that, in addition to perceiving benefits and challenges within the system, the established culture of assessment had an impact on stakeholder perceptions. A continued desire for reporting on progress exists where parents are concerned; however, a cultural shift is reported as desirable whereby the qualitative aspects of development are reflected upon, rather than focusing on the summative results of assessment. In addition, it was recognised that the current system of assessment focuses on summative CAO points as a measure of success, as reflected upon in Section 7.3. In order to change this culture, a greater spectrum of achievement must be recognised. Indeed, the culture of success within the post-primary system of education and assessment must be redefined. Finally, it was noted that in order for significant reform to occur, student voice is of primary importance, as teachers reported that they did not perceive their role as involving the changing of mindsets, and an established lack of participation on behalf of parents was evident. Contrary to the perspectives of parents and teachers, students felt strongly about reform, and they had many opinions on all aspects of it. However, they perceived their voices as being unheard within the case study school. It will be interesting to understand the impact of the pending 'Students and Parent Charter Bill' on the reform of post-primary assessment culture when the bill eventually becomes policy.

7.6 Recommendations for the local case study school

This section draws on the empirical evidence gathered in this research, and three recommendations for the case study school have been generated:

1. An assessment policy should be created in order to provide clarity for stakeholders around all elements of assessment. Within this policy, the proposed benefits of each individual assessment can be presented, and the perceived challenges addressed.

2. A review of the management and implementation of the CBAs should be carried out, and should include stakeholder voice, in order to review the experience of all stakeholders in the school to date, streamlining the process to enhance links with national policy.

3. A programme review should take place which includes stakeholder voice, in order to ascertain whether the LCVP and the LCA would meet the needs of students in the case study school.

It is recommended that stakeholder voice be included in each of the three recommended actions. It is also recommended that students in particular should be consulted for greater insight into the general organisation of assessment within the case study school. A similar recommendation was also generated in the most recent WSE/MLL report, which noted that the inclusion of student voice in aspects of the case study school 'is an area for further development' (DES, 2016g, p.4). Incorporating student voice into the recommendations for the case study school would provide school management with significant insight into the operation of assessment in the case study school. Each of the three noted recommendations will be discussed in the following sections.

7.6.1 Recommendation of the development of an assessment policy

From the empirical research generated, it is recommended that an assessment policy should be created in the case study school in order to provide clarity for stakeholders around all elements of assessment. Within this policy, the proposed benefits of each individual assessment could be presented, and the perceived challenges addressed. For example, in the case study school, stakeholders reported a deficit of information and awareness of assessment processes. It is recommended that an assessment policy, including a rationale and clear guidelines on all pertinent issues relating to the administration of tests and the use of assessment data, etc., should be created and communicated to all stakeholders prior to an assessment taking place. The assessment policy may then outline all pertinent information for stakeholders on the use of assessment data. This recommendation was also noted by the Inspectorate in the most recent

WSE/MLL inspection (DES, 2016g). However, an assessment policy had not been developed since this recommendation in 2016.

Confusion and a lack of clarity was evident amongst stakeholders with regard to the entrance assessment and the CBAs in particular. For example, with regard to the entrance assessment as discussed in Chapter Six, this research has found that stakeholders reported that they were:

1) unaware of the purpose of the assessment.

2) unfamiliar with and unprepared for the assessment content.

3) not provided with the result of the assessment.

4) not aware of the use(s) to which the results/data are put.

Indeed, confusion and a lack of clarification were evident with regard to all stages of the psychometric assessment, as expressed by stakeholders during this research (as discussed in Section 6.5.2):

> 3rdYrStudent1M: Why did we do an entrance exam? It's a waste of our time, and it's probably a waste of the teacher's time […] What's the point?
>
> 6thYrStudent1M: I don't think anyone knows how much it means […] if it means anything

In the absence of a clear, identified purpose, some students imagined a purpose which directly impacted on their experience:

> 2ndYrStudent2F: I thought they weren't going to let me in if I didn't do well.

The absence of information and awareness among students and parents concerning the entrance assessment is highly problematic. The DES provided Circular 0058/2019 (DES, 2019g) to schools as an update to its predecessor, Circular 0035/2017, which had updated Circular 0034/2015. This circular (DES, 2019g) recommends that the following should be provided to parents and students in relation to psychometric assessments:

i. Information regarding the purpose of the assessment.

ii. Information on the identity of those with whom the assessment results may be shared, and why.

iii. Information on how and when the consent of parents and students should be obtained in advance of the assessment instrument being administered.

iv. Clarity around all further GDPR concerns.

v. An outline of the school's assessment policy in line with the context of other school policies.

Interestingly, the provider of the entrance assessments also notes the importance of clarifying all aspects of the assessments, as it is aware that 'there may be misinformation circulating about why students are being tested and how results are used' (GL Assessment, 2020, p.127). Most significantly, the Education Act notes that it is the responsibility of a school to ensure that students and their parents have access 'in the prescribed manner […] to records kept by that school relating to the progress of that student in his or her education' (GOI, 1998, p.13). Hence, it is a clear recommendation that an assessment policy be created by the case study school, in association and consultation with stakeholders, to clarify all aspects of assessment, including the entrance assessment, as discussed, and the CBA, which will be discussed in the next section.

7.6.2 Recommendation of review of the implementation of CBAs

Implementation of the CBA in the local case study school was found to be a challenge by stakeholders, who identified issues with the consistency of approach to the assessment and with communication around the assessment. It is noted that, notwithstanding the identified benefits of the CBAs as discussed in Section 6.5.1 with regard to continuity and reform, the general experience of stakeholders in relation to these reformed assessments was one where these assessments were becoming devalued. This finding has also been noted in previous empirical research on the Irish post-primary system. For example, Banks et al. (2018) note that parents are not clear on the changes within the post-primary system, due to a lack of communication.

In addition, this research has found that the experience of stakeholders with regard to the CBA is one which is not aligned with national policy. The philosophy of the CBAs is that

assessment is part of the ebb and flow of formative learning and classroom management, as discussed in Section 4.3.2 (DES, 2012a; NCCA, 2015). Instead, some students reported that 'it was so much stress', while parents' perceptions can be summed up by the following phrase: 'we are hating it'.

Banks et al. (2018) note that stakeholders must be better-informed, particularly when significant reform is occurring. It is proposed that a local review of national policy and an overview of stakeholder experiences would benefit the implementation and organisation of the CBA assessment in the case study school. Indeed, the creation of a local assessment policy on the CBA would inform and enhance the management and operation of this assessment by informing stakeholders.

7.6.3 Recommendation of exploring the LCA and LCVP

The third and final recommendation for the local case study school based on the empirical evidence gathered in this research is that an exploration into the potential for LCA and LCVP programmes to support students should take place. Specifically, a programme review should include stakeholder voice in order to ascertain if the LCA and the LCVP would meet the formative needs of students in the case study school.

The LCA

The LCA is not currently offered in the case study school. Growing Up in Ireland research (2019b) indicates that 4% of students take the Leaving Certificate Applied programme nationally. Similarly, O'Donnell (2018, p.17) notes that aapproximately 5% of Senior Cycle students undertake the LCA each year. It is possible to project, therefore, that 4-5% of the students in the case study school could benefit from such a programme if the LCA was to be introduced. With regard to the data gathered in this research, analysis of the summative data displayed in Table 30 indicates that, for the case study school,

- in 2017, seven students (4.45%) obtained fewer than 100 CAO points (n=157); in 2018 11 students (7.8%) obtained fewer than 100 CAO points (n=141)
- in 2017, 11 students (7%) obtained fewer than 150 CAO points (n=157); in 2018, 20 students (14%) obtained fewer than 150 points (n=141)

Hence, it is deduced, from the summative data presented in Table 30, that it is possible that a minimum of 4.45% of students from the 2017 cohort and 7.8% of students from the 2018 cohort could benefit from registering for the LCA. However, it is recommended that the school consider more than summative data alone when considering the introduction of the LCA programme. As discussed in Chapter Four, the LCA is a distinct, self-contained two-year Leaving Certificate programme aimed at preparing learners for adult and working life. As such, it is recognised by the Professional Development Service for Teachers as providing opportunities for achievement and excellence which are not recognised within the Leaving Certificate Established (PDST, 2016). Indeed, it is recognised that the LCA 'adopts a more hands-on approach to learning' (GUI, 2019b, p.2). The LCA prepares learners for the demanding transition to adult and working life by recognising a variety of skills, including communication skills, enterprise, and innovation (PDST, 2016). It is recommended that the local case study school investigate whether stakeholders would welcome the LCA based on the formative and practical approach to learning and the variety of skills taught. In addition, research could be conducted to investigate whether, from the perspective of stakeholders, the introduction of the LCA could impact positively on student wellbeing. In the context of the finding of this research that a large proportion of students reported 'extreme nervousness' towards the Leaving Certificate Established, as discussed in relation to Figure 28, it is proposed that the introduction of the LCA could reduce levels of stress amongst 4% or more of the student population. This is based on the finding of Banks and Smith (2015) that students taking the Leaving Certificate Applied programme reported lower stress levels than their peers facing the Leaving Certificate Established (Banks and Smyth, 2015).

The LCVP

It is suggested that the case study school could benefit from a review of the programme of LCVP as a potential addition to the Leaving Certificate Established programme in the school. This recommendation is based on the findings that (i) students could potentially benefit in relation to their summative CAO points, and that (ii) stakeholders currently perceive a lack of connection between their post-primary assessment experience and the perceived needs of future employers, which the LCVP could directly and formatively address.

In relation to the first point and the potential benefit for students with regard to their summative assessment scores, this research has found that students in the case study school could benefit in relation to their CAO points, as presented in Tables 30 and 31. Analysis of the statistical data showed that 96 students from the 2017 and 2018 cohorts (n=298) could have potentially increased their CAO points had they achieved an LCVP merit. In addition, a further 59 students from 2017 and 2018 could potentially have increased their CAO points had they achieved an LCVP distinction. On a national level, approximately 15,600 students participate in the LCVP each year (PDST, 2020); 80% of these students who undertake the LCVP utilise the points to gain access to higher education (ibid).

In relation to the current lack of connection between a student's post-primary assessments and the perceived needs of future employers, this research found that a strong majority of stakeholders (60%) agreed/strongly agreed that assessment is important for an individual's future opportunities, as discussed in Section 6.4.2. However, it must be observed that, while the majority of stakeholders agree/strongly agreed with this statement, only 29% of students and 24% of parents agreed that assessment tells employers how capable they are/their child is, as illustrated in Table 17. The LCVP has been specifically developed to respond to this perspective, which has also been noted by the Irish government, where enterprising skills and attitudes cannot be 'taught' in the traditional classroom. Rather, they must be fostered through involvement in activity-based learning (Government of Ireland, 2000, p.23). Indeed, the LCVP is described as 'an intervention' to the Senior Cycle (Government of Ireland, 2000, p.6). It prepares post-primary students for adult life by ensuring that they are educated in an alternative way to complement the established Leaving Certificate, and in order to cater for diversity (PDST, 2020a). It is recommended that a review of the LCVP should be conducted by senior management to include the informing of stakeholders regarding what the LCVP offers, and to then gauge their perspectives on it.

7.7 Recommendations: for national policymakers

This section draws on the empirical evidence gathered in this research and has generated three recommendations for national policymakers, as detailed below. With regard to the main research question, 'What is the perception of post-primary assessment among students and parents in a case study school in Ireland during a period of simultaneous

continuity and reform?,' the following findings may be of particular interest for policymakers, who may reflect on points made to inform assessment-related developments on a national scale:

1. Transition Year is perceived by stakeholders to be a positive programme for student development due to the absence of formal assessment.

2. Stakeholders reported a lack of information and confusion with regard to existing and reformed assessments. Department policy and publications should be aligned to provide a foundation for understanding among stakeholders, thereby minimising confusion within the system of assessment.

3. Qualitative feedback on student progress should be prioritised and facilitated by trained teachers in order to create a more holistic culture of assessment.

Each of these three recommendations is addressed below in relation to the empirical evidence gathered during this research.

7.7.1 Stakeholder perceptions of Transition Year

Demand for Transition Year places in the case study school is high. Capacity has 'been increased from two to three class groups; efforts are ongoing to increase this to four' (2016g, p.5). As discussed in Chapter Six, Transition Year is perceived by stakeholders to be a positive programme for student development due to the absence of formal assessment. One parent encapsulated the general local perspective towards Transition Year when she noted, 'Here is the year when you are trying to develop the child'. The identified benefits of TY are not solely limited to the case study school. Indeed, on a national level, the NCCA has identified that TY is an opportunity for students to mature and develop (NCCA, 2018a; Banks et al., 2018).

Indeed, with regard to the impact of Transition Year on subsequent summative attainment in assessments, this research found that, for students of the case study school, TY does not have a significant impact on Senior Cycle assessments, as illustrated in Table 14. From Table 14, above, it is clear that, for all subjects, 'r' had a lower and upper boundary of $0.05 \leq r \leq 0.32$; may be described as a weak positive correlation. This led to the observation that a strong relationship does not exist between the age of a student and his/her assessment results in Senior Cycle post-primary education. Indeed, the low positive correlation indicates that TY does not impact on assessment attainment, as age

does not correlate strongly with assessment results. This is an important finding in the context of continuity and reform of assessment in the Irish post-primary system. Given the focus among stakeholders on summative assessment, it is extraordinary that there is high demand for a year in school that has little bearing on summative Leaving Certificate assessment results, rather focusing on the holistic development of the student. It is recommended that policymakers carry out a national study on Transition Year in order to understand how the absence of assessment connects with individual development.

7.7.2 Stakeholders perceive confusion within the system of assessment

Stakeholders reported a lack of information with regard to certain assessments. It is proposed that department policy and publications should be aligned to provide a consistent foundation for understanding, thereby minimising confusion within the system of assessment, whether that be with regard to reform or continuity of an assessment. This will be discussed with regard to (i) the entrance assessment and (ii) the Junior Cycle reform, as follows:

Entrance assessments

There is no Department of Education and Skills policy which focuses on and legislates for the exact 'best practice' approach which schools should take with regard to entrance assessments. Simultaneously, however, many schools, including the case study school, utilise psychometric assessments as their chosen entrance assessment. In relation to psychometric assessments, the presence of two seemingly contrasting strands of department policy and publications can cause confusion and conflict within schools and amongst stakeholders. This conflict can be observed in many department publications. For example, with regard to the case study school, the WSE/MLL report praised the school for having results in line with national norms, but it also criticised teachers for being too exam-focused (DES, 2016g). In addition, confusion and conflict can be observed by comparing Circular 0058/2019, which legislates for psychometric assessments, and Inspectorate reports, such as that which catalysed this research, wherein it stated:

> The Principal and Deputy Principal [should] complete an analysis of the students' achievements in the certificate examinations against National norms […] this analysis [should] include a comparison of student outcomes against the standardised tests administered on entry to the School […] These measures will provide a more realistic perspective on student performance. (DES, 2016e, p.3)

This recommendation on behalf of the Inspectorate is contrary to the content of Circular 0058/2019, which relates directly to psychometric assessments. Hence, it is proposed that responsibility for the current conflict and concurrent confusion for stakeholders with regard to the entrance assessment do not rest solely with the case study school. Rather, it is a broader national issue. It is recommended that a review of policy take place at national level to minimise confusion within the system. Reflecting on the Inspectorate recommendations, in particular, highlighted two issues within this research:

(i) Is it appropriate to use psychometric data for the purpose of measuring a more realistic perspective of performance?

(ii) Are management appropriately trained in relation to understanding and managing psychometric assessment data?

These issues are discussed below.

Appropriate use of psychometric assessment data

This research highlighted the appropriate use of psychometric assessment data and explored whether it is appropriate to use this type of data as described. As illustrated in Chapter Two, Table 3, GL Assessment found the correlation between Leaving Certificate English and the CAT4 verbal SAS to be 0.67. This research found the correlation to be 0.21 (Chapter 6, Table 23). Hence, using English as an example, it is clear that the CAT4 correlation between English and verbal reasoning is found to be lower in this research than in the research carried out by the commercial company behind the testing. It is acknowledged and accepted that the number of assessments used by GL Assessment for the purpose of calculating the correlation coefficient was greater than that used for this research (n=138). However, it is reasonable to question the significance of the data provided by GL Assessment, particularly with regard to the recommendation of the Inspectorate. It is also noted that, despite the provision of correlations to support the purpose of its assessment, the test publisher denies that there is any direct relationship

between the CAT 4 psychometric assessment and the curriculum taught and assessed in schools, stating that the CAT4 'has no direct connection to the curriculum' (GL Assessment, 2020, p.127). In addition, it is noted, within the *Teacher Guidelines* handbook, that the assessment scores should be 'treated with caution', as they may not be entirely accurate for a number of reasons (GL Assessment, 2020, p.9). Reflecting on these points, it is proposed that Circular 0058/2019 is a more appropriate guide than recommendations of the Inspectorate, with regard to psychometric assessments. It does not recognise the use of psychometric assessment data as appropriate for baseline data to track students or to forecast long-range assessment grades. Instead, it requires that 'Results of an individual standardised test should not be interpreted in isolation' (DES, 2019g, p.1). Indeed, the test distributer itself warns that assessment data should not be interpreted in isolation:

> CAT4 results should not be presented in isolation […] Any misconceptions of CAT4 being a measure of fixed ability should be challenged. (GL Assessment, 2020, p.130)

This research presents a challenge to the Inspectorate with regard to the many recommendations about the use of this data within WSE/MLL reports, as outlined in Chapter One. Given the statistical analysis of assessment results in the case study school and the corresponding correlation coefficients, it is recommended that the use of psychometric assessments as baseline data reports no longer be endorsed by the Inspectorate.

Appropriate management of psychometric assessment data

As noted in Chapter One, the Inspectorate recommends that a number of stakeholders, such as school management, year heads and classroom teachers, should have access to, and should actively utilise, psychometric assessment data in order to use this analysis for decision-making within the local school context (DES, 2016e, 2015d, 2018f). However, it is of pivotal importance that policymakers are aware that a postgraduate qualification in psychometric assessment is required in order to 'administer, score, interpret and provide feedback' where psychometric data is concerned (DES, 2019g, p.3). Hence, the recommendations on behalf of the Inspectorate are ill-informed at policy level in terms of the appropriate qualifications for school personnel to handle and make decisions in relation to the assessment data.

The empirical data gathered in relation to this research indicated that the special educational needs teachers were aware of many of the issues documented in Circular 0058/2019 with regard to assessment data. However, the teachers also showed a lack of awareness of national policy outlined in Circular 0058/2019 regarding communication with stakeholders and the requirement that 'Iinformation should be provided to parents and students regarding the purpose of the assessment and with whom the assessment results may be shared and why'. (DES, 2019g, p.3). It is critical that policymakers are aware that psychometric assessment of students is occurring in schools such as the case study school without the knowledge of students and parents as to the purpose or use of assessment data. In addition, it is of critical importance that those who utilise the psychometric assessments are up to date with all aspects of related CPD. There is a lack of information on the extent to which post-primary teachers are qualified and actively attending CPD with regard to psychometric assessments at post-primary level. However, in their research at primary level, O Leary et al. (2019) found that 75% of respondents (primary teachers) indicated that they had not engaged in formal learning in standardised testing since their initial qualification. This is a concern for the post-primary system, where it is recognised that 'confusion' exists within post-primary schools with regard to psychometric assessments (DES, 2019g, pp.1-2). Hence, it is recommended that policymakers and the Inspectorate align and clarify policy and publications, inspecting schools with regard to the appropriate policies and practice in order to eliminate further confusion on the issue.

The Junior Cycle reform

The challenge for contemporary education systems, therefore, is to educate a workforce in a manner which is appropriate to the ever-changing needs of industry (Nusche, 2018). Today, it is necessary to produce skilled workers who will meet the needs of the knowledge economy, with an emphasis on collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking skills (Battelle for Kids, 2020; Banks et al., 2015). This is the contemporary narrative found in the broader literature, as discussed in Chapter Three, which informed the development of policy in the area of the reformed Junior Cycle to include the CBA outlined in Chapter Four. The aim of the revised Junior Cycle is for post-primary schools to facilitate a contemporary programme of learning characterised by 'quality, inclusivity and relevance' for the current generation of students in 21st-century Ireland (DES, 2012c, p.1). Baird et al. (2014, p.27) suggest that consideration

should be given to ‘placing more emphasis upon the assessment of higher order thinking skills’ in state assessment in Ireland, which would be in keeping with international trends in assessment. This is found to be a feature of the Junior Cycle. Indeed, the CBA is a reformed assessment within post-primary education underpinned by, and reliant upon, a strong commitment to formative assessment as a normal part of learning and teaching in classrooms (DES, 2015b, p.2). However, stakeholders of the case study school experienced challenges in relation to the integration of the CBAs into the local case study school culture, as discussed in Sections 6.4, 6.5, 7.5 and 7.6. With regard to national implementation of the new Junior Cycle assessment, however, teachers noted that a lack of training and resources impacted on the transition towards and introduction of this new assessment:

> Teacher1: in terms of training, in terms of finance, in terms of everything. It was done the wrong way around.
>
> Teacher5: it needs to come from the top.
>
> Teacher1: am I doing the right thing? Am I doing something they’re going to be tested on? […] I mean, next year, I’m going to be teaching to an exam, which is not what’s supposed to happen.

Indeed, teachers expressed frustration at the level of information and training they were afforded in relation to reform of the Junior Cycle assessment. Teachers expressed confusion about the expectations of policymakers concerning their assessment practice. The Director of Assessment acknowledged that there was a ‘bottom-up’ approach to the implementation of this assessment.

> Director of Assessment (NCCA): we are looking to schools to see what practice will emerge from there rather than, in isolation from practice, drop[ping] something on the system

Hence, it is proposed that policymakers be made aware of the lack of information and the consequent frustration of teachers which impacted negatively on the experience of stakeholders. It is recommended that policymakers review their approach to reform and, in the future, combine emerging practice with clear guidelines and policy to support informed reform of practice. This will nurture consistency within the system.

7.7.3 Qualitative feedback on student progress should be prioritised in order to provide a foundation for reform

As discussed in Chapter Six, it is evident that the culture of assessment has become one in which summative quantification of learning is focused upon and prioritised above all else in the post-primary case study school. One student encapsulated the current culture of assessment as perceived by stakeholders: 'why should l learn anything if it's not going to benefit me points-wise?' It is proposed that policymakers need to devise an approach to change this type of narrative as exemplified in the case study school.

It is suggested that a shift towards a more qualitative or holistic approach to reporting which will create a need for a more qualitative or holistic approach to assessment is required at a national level in order to change the narrative from one which is primarily summative to a renewed and reformed formative approach. This would reflect the contemporary approach discussed in Chapters Two, Three and Four. For example, as previously noted, the OECD (2005, p.3) recognises that 'success in life' requires more than knowledge and skills in reading, mathematics, memory recall and problem-solving. Gorard (2010) suggests that parents want, above all, happiness, and security for their children. This is echoed by the Irish Second Level Students' Union (ISSU) (2010, p.10), which proposes that it is a natural 'human condition' for parents to want the best for their own children. Hence, it is proposed that at the level of the student and the parent, this reform is desired and has been requested in this research. It has also been recognised by other researchers, authors, and advocates. GL Assessment also recognises the desire amongst post-primary students and parents for more qualitative and in-depth feedback, and it is responding to this demand within the market. GL Assessment explains that it is 'following extensive market research and feedback to ensure that new reports are clearly focused on specific audiences' (GL Assessment, 2020, p.118). In this way, GL Assessment is providing a specialised and targeted service to parents and students. It is responding to demands in the market whereby students and parents are very interested in individualised qualitative and holistic feedback. It is proposed that, in the absence of alternative feedback provided by teachers on individual educational development, this commercial company is filling the gap.

It is recommended that policymakers implement reform to require a qualitative and holistic approach to reporting on schools in an evaluative way in response to stakeholder perspectives on what could provide effective feedback. This is recognised by the Department of Education and Skills to be important (DES, 2015b). It is proposed that a

system similar to that which is utilised by the Adult Guidance Services (NCGE, 2017) could be introduced by policymakers in the post-primary system in Ireland in order to provide a simultaneous record of all quantitative and qualitative occurrences in the system. It is proposed that reformed reporting will set the tone for a new culture and a new narrative around assessment in post-primary schools in Ireland.

7.8 Conclusion

This research was undertaken between 2016 and 2020, during a period of continuity and reform in the Irish system of post-primary education. An evaluation of assessment in Irish post-primary education through the evaluation of stakeholder perceptions was conducted in relation to three research questions:

- What is the perception of post-primary assessment among students and parents in a case study school in Ireland during a period of simultaneous continuity and reform?
- What are the benefits of assessment within a post-primary school?
- What are the challenges of assessment within a post-primary school?

In order to effectively research these three research questions, a review of the wider literature was undertaken. Previous empirical research conducted in the areas of stakeholder voice and assessment was consulted. International and Irish empirical studies informed the formulation of the three research questions noted above, as gaps in the contemporary research were identified. Subsequent to a review of previous empirical research, a broad literature review was conducted to fully inform the researcher of all pertinent theory and discussion on issues relating to stakeholder voice and assessment. Finally, a review of international and national policy on stakeholder voice and assessment was undertaken in order to understand the national and local legislation providing a policy framework for practice.

In order to make an effective and valued contribution to research, a sound approach to all aspects of research design is required (Creswell, 2014). Drawing on the conceptual framework, consideration was given to the creation of an appropriate research design wherein all stages of the research are clearly and considerately applied in order to result in well-founded conclusions (Yin, 2018). In line with a pragmatic approach to ontology and epistemology, the researcher selected a case study as a pragmatic form of

methodological enquiry for this research in order to provide an analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education through the evaluation of stakeholder perceptions. This research presents a unique and initial analysis of assessment in Irish post-primary education through the evaluation of stakeholder perceptions at a unique point in time during Irish post-primary education, as previously noted.

Thematic analysis of the data resulted in the identification of three distinct yet interlinked themes which were presented in Chapter Six:

- Theme 1: Stakeholders perceive assessment through the purpose of the assessment
- Theme 2: Stakeholders perceive assessment through the culture of assessment
- Theme 3: Stakeholders perceive that post-primary assessment has an impact on student wellbeing.

This chapter presented discussion on each of the three themes in relation to the three research questions which framed the research. A number of recommendations were identified with regard to the case study school itself, for national policymakers and for researchers who will investigate assessment and stakeholder perspectives in the future. Indeed, upon reflection on this research in full, it is concluded that the purpose, culture, and impact of assessment on wellbeing are interlinked and interdependent where the perspectives of stakeholders are concerned. As regards future reform within education, the impact of the continuity of the established system must not be underestimated.

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Appendix A: Consent form

The consent form appended here was deemed appropriate for this research by the DCU research ethics committee for the student survey participants. An almost identical form (with parent replacing the word student) was distributed to parents prior to participation in the survey. In addition, corresponding forms were also presented to all participants prior to taking part in the qualitative phase of the research.

Informed Consent Form

Researcher: Carol Guildea, PhD Student, Dublin City University
e-mail: carol.guildea@mail.dcu.ie

i) Project Title

The Value of Assessment in 21st Century Post Primary Education in Ireland? A sequential mixed m case study exploring the conceptions of stakeholders (parents / guardians and students).

ii) Clarification of the purpose of the research

This research project investigates the opinions of stakeholders (parents and students) towards assessment in post primary schools in Ireland.

iii) Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language Statement

Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	*Yes/No*
I understand the information provided	*Yes/No*
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	*Yes/No*
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	*Yes/No*

iv) Participant's involvement in this study is completely voluntary and I can withdraw from the process at any stage up until publication.

v) Confidentiality of data

Every precaution will be taken to ensure your anonymity. The researcher will be the sole people with access to the data and pseudonyms will be used throughout the paper.

vi) **Signature**

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researcher, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

Participant's Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Parent Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B: Focus group schedule: Parent questions

Preparation Notes for Parent Focus Group

- **Entrance Exams:**

What do you remember about your child doing your entrance exams to the school?
What was it like for them to do those entrance exams?
What was it like to get the results of those entrance exams?
What did the results mean for your child?
What did the results mean for you?

- **Junior Certificate/ Cycle Exams:**

Do you remember your child doing your Junior Certificate exams?
What was it like for your child to do those Junior Cert Exams?
Did your child do any projects / classroom-based assessments for Junior Cycle?
What was it like for your child to do those projects / classroom-based assessments for Junior Cycle?
What was it like to get the results of those examinations?
What do the results mean for your child?
What do the results mean for you?

- **Other Assessments:**

Are there situations other than tests in which your child can show what s/he knows?
Has your child experienced other types of assessment e.g. standardized testing / e-portfolios?
What was it like for your child to do these types of assessment?
What was it like to get the results of those assessments?
What do the results mean for your child?
What do the results mean for you?
Apart from the assessments we have discussed, are there other ways for your child to show the teacher and your peers what you know?

Appendix C: Focus group schedule: SEN Department (teacher) questions

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Preparation notes for Teacher focus Group: Potential Questions

- **Entrance Assessment:**

How are entrance assessments administered in this school?
What is the purpose of the administration of this assessment?
Do all students undertake the same assessment?
Are students / parents and guardians aware of how entrance exam results are used?
What type of questions are asked by students / parents & guardians around the entrance assessment?
Who has access to the results and for what purpose?

- **Junior Certificate/ Cycle Exams:**

What are your thoughts on the Junior Certificate assessment process?
What are your thoughts on the Junior Cycle assessment process?
What are your thoughts on the Junior Certificate profile of achievement?
How will the change from Junior Cycle to Junior Certificate affect your teaching / methods of assessment?

- **Other Assessments:**

Are there situations other than tests in which students can show what they know?
Have you experienced other types of assessment e.g. standardized testing / e-portfolios?
What was it like to do these types of assessment with students?
What was it like to get the results of those assessments?
What do the results of these different assessments mean for you?

Appendix D: Focus group schedule: Student questions

Student Focus Group: Potential Questions

- **Entrance Exams:**

What do you remember about doing your entrance exams?
What was it like to do those entrance exams?
What was it like to get the results of those entrance exams?
What do the results mean for you?

- **Junior Certificate/ Cycle Exams:**

Do you remember doing your Junior Certificate exams?
What was it like to do those Junior Cert Exams?
Did you do any projects / classroom-based assessments for Junior Cycle?
What was it like to do those projects / classroom-based assessments for Junior Cycle?
What was it like to get the results of those examinations?
What do the results mean for you?

- **Other Assessments:**

Are there situations other than tests in which you can show what you know?
Have you experienced other types of assessment e.g. standardized testing / eportfolios?
What was it like to do these types of assessment?
What was it like to get the results of those assessments?
What do the results mean for you?
How do you experience typical assessment situations? Are they easy, difficult? Can you show the teacher and your peers what you know?

Appendix E: Interview questions for Director of Assessment (NCCA)

The interview questions for the meeting with the Director of Assessment (NCCA) were agreed ahead of the appointment.

The Value of Assessment in 21st Century Post-primary Education in Ireland: A nested mixed-methods case study exploring the conceptions of stakeholders (parents/guardians and students).

Interview Schedule: NCCA's Director of Assessment (Norman Emerson)

Category / Area:	Question:
General:	What is the 'value' of assessment in the Irish post-primary system? What makes assessment 'valuable' for stakeholders?
Education For Human Development and Wellbeing	Should the provision of the 'Wellbeing' aspect of the Junior Cycle be assessed? If so, how? Do believe the assessment procedures for the Junior Cycle are an improvement on the Junior Certificate? Is the proportion of marks awarded for the CBA's fair for students? Should teachers be provided with standardised test results as baseline data in order to set specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound targets for students? Is this fair for students? What is the fairest method of assessment for students competing for third level places?
Education For Economic Development and the Production of a Labour Force	To what extent are skills for the 21st Century included in curriculum / assessment in the current post-primary system? How have assessment methods associated with LCA / LCVP / Transition Year been received to date? How is the success / failure of these methods of assessment in LCA / LCVP / TY programmes reflected upon?
Education for Societal Development and Active Citizenship	Will the Junior Cycle CBAs assist with developing active citizens? Is there a link between grades obtained from assessment in post-primary education and 'success' in the labour force?

Appendix F: Plain language statement

The plain language statement appended here was deemed appropriate for this research by the DCU research ethics committee for the student survey participants. An almost identical form (with parent replacing the word student) was distributed to parents prior to participation in the survey. In addition, corresponding forms were also presented to all participants prior to taking part in the qualitative phase of the research.

Student Surveys

Plain Language Statement:

You are invited to participate in a research project.
The Title of the Research: The Value of Assessment in 21st Century Post Primary Education in Ireland? A sequential mixed-methods case study exploring the opinions of stakeholders (parents/guardians and students).

This research project is being carried out by Carol Guildea (researcher) and is being supervised by DCU's Professor Gerry McNamara and Doctor Martin Brown. These researchers are from DCU's School of Policy and Practice and the research is being undertaken by Carol for research at Doctorate level in DCU.

This research is about gathering information on the opinions held by parents / guardians and students on assessment in post primary schools in Ireland. The views of parents / guardians and students are very important, but there is little or no contemporary research done on this area.

If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to complete a survey on your opinions of assessment. Your privacy will be protected as the survey is anonymous. The information you provide will be disposed of as soon as the research is finished (June 2020). Confidentiality and full privacy is guaranteed except in the event where there is a child protection concern. Your involvement in filling out the survey would not involve a risk for you, any different for everyday life in class / in school.

It is completely up to you as to whether you want to be involved in this research by completing the survey. There is no direct benefit for you by being involved in this research. This research aims to make improvements based on your opinions, so there could be benefits in the future.

A summary of your opinions will be compared with opinions of other students and published as PhD research. Your name, your school and your location will not be revealed at any stage of this process. Up until publication you can decide that you want to withdraw from this research. The recording of your survey results will be deleted at the end of the research project in 2020.

If you have any further questions regarding this request for your involvement in this research project, please feel free to e-mail me directly at carol.guildea5@mail.dcu.ie

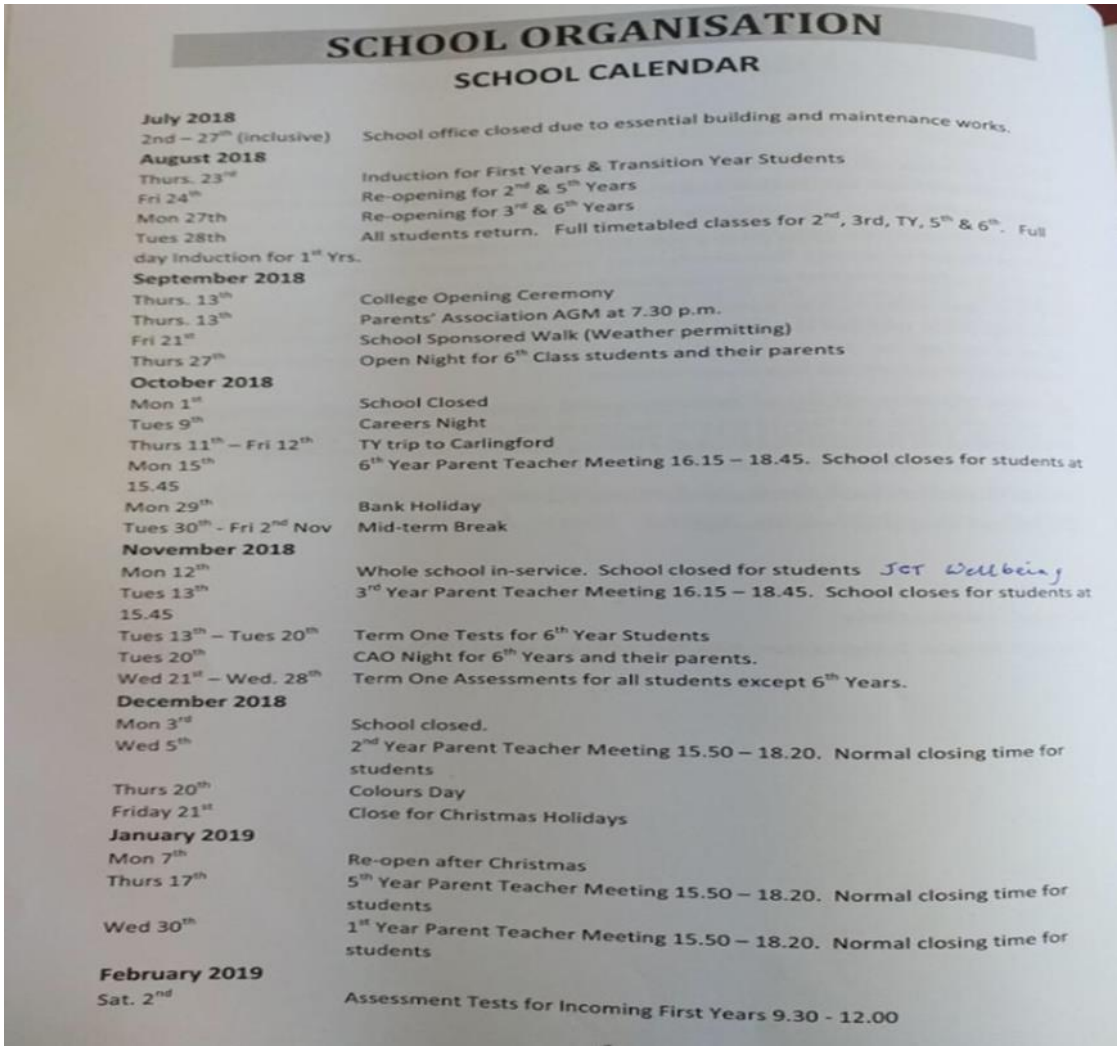
Please read the following documents before agreeing or not agreeing to participate in the research.

- Example of proposed survey questions
- The informed consent form

If you wish to contact an independent person, please contact The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000. Email: rec@dcu.ie.

Yours Sincerely, Carol Guildea

Appendix G: School calendar for first half of academic year 2018-2019



SCHOOL ORGANISATION

SCHOOL CALENDAR

July 2018	
2nd – 27th (inclusive)	School office closed due to essential building and maintenance works.
August 2018	
Thurs. 23rd	Induction for First Years & Transition Year Students
Fri 24th	Re-opening for 2nd & 5th Years
Mon 27th	Re-opening for 3rd & 6th Years
Tues 28th	All students return. Full timetabled classes for 2nd, 3rd, TY, 5th & 6th. Full day Induction for 1st Yrs.
September 2018	
Thurs. 13th	College Opening Ceremony
Thurs. 13th	Parents' Association AGM at 7.30 p.m.
Fri 21st	School Sponsored Walk (Weather permitting)
Thurs 27th	Open Night for 6th Class students and their parents
October 2018	
Mon 1st	School Closed
Tues 9th	Careers Night
Thurs 11th – Fri 12th	TY trip to Carlingford
Mon 15th	6th Year Parent Teacher Meeting 16.15 – 18.45. School closes for students at 15.45
Mon 29th	Bank Holiday
Tues 30th - Fri 2nd Nov	Mid-term Break
November 2018	
Mon 12th	Whole school in-service. School closed for students JCT Wellbeing
Tues 13th	3rd Year Parent Teacher Meeting 16.15 – 18.45. School closes for students at 15.45
Tues 13th – Tues 20th	Term One Tests for 6th Year Students
Tues 20th	CAO Night for 6th Years and their parents.
Wed 21st – Wed. 28th	Term One Assessments for all students except 6th Years.
December 2018	
Mon 3rd	School closed.
Wed 5th	2nd Year Parent Teacher Meeting 15.50 – 18.20. Normal closing time for students
Thurs 20th	Colours Day
Friday 21st	Close for Christmas Holidays
January 2019	
Mon 7th	Re-open after Christmas
Thurs 17th	5th Year Parent Teacher Meeting 15.50 – 18.20. Normal closing time for students
Wed 30th	1st Year Parent Teacher Meeting 15.50 – 18.20. Normal closing time for students
February 2019	
Sat. 2nd	Assessment Tests for Incoming First Years 9.30 - 12.00

Appendix H: Statistical analysis: Further data calculations

Additional statistical information associated with Table 14 (Chapter Six).

Description	r-value	Degrees of freedom (DF)	Test Statistics (T) (2 tailed)	*p*-value (2 tailed)
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: English and 5th Year, summer	0.20	136	2.380	0.019*
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: Irish and 5th Year, summer	0.29	136	3.534	0.001*
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: maths and 5th Year, summer	0.22	136	2.630	0.010*
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: English and 5th Year, Feb	0.17	136	2.012	0.046*
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: Irish and 5th Year, Feb	0.19	136	2.257	0.026*
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: maths and 5th Year, Feb	0.15	136	1.769	0.079
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: English and 5th Year, Christmas	0.19	136	2.257	0.026*

The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: Irish and 5th Year, Christmas	0.29	136	3.534	0.001*
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: maths and 5th Year, Christmas	0.16	136	1.890	0.061
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: English and 6th Year, Christmas	0.22	136	2.630	0.010*
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: Irish and 6th Year, Christmas	0.17	136	2.012	0.046*
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: maths and 6th Year, Christmas	0.20	136	2.380	0.019*
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: English and 6th Year, mock	0.23	136	2.756	0.007*
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: Irish and 6th Year, mock	0.32	136	3.939	0.000*
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: maths and 6th Year, mock	0.20	136	2.380	0.019*

The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: English and Leaving Certificate	0.07	136	0.818	0.415
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: Irish and Leaving Certificate	0.05	136	0.584	0.560
The relationship between student age and Senior Cycle assessment grades: maths and Leaving Certificate	0.06	136	0.701	0.485

Additional statistical information associated with Table 23 (Chapter Six)

Description	***r*-value**	**Degrees of freedom (DF)**	**Test statistics (T) (2 tailed)**	***p*-value (2 tailed)**
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Leaving Certificate English	0.21	136	2.505	0.013*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Leaving Certificate Irish	0.14	136	1.649	0.101
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment numerical reasoning and Leaving Certificate maths	0.32	136	3.939	0.000*

The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Leaving Certificate mock English	0.5	136	6.733	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Leaving Certificate mock Irish	0.4	136	5.090	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment numerical reasoning and Leaving Certificate mock maths	0.58	136	8.303	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Sixth Year Christmas, English	0.59	136	8.522	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Sixth Year Christmas, Irish	0.30	136	3.667	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment numerical reasoning Sixth Year Christmas, and maths	0.56	136	7.88	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Fifth Year summer, English	0.60	136	8.746	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Fifth Year summer, Irish	0.37	136	4.645	0.000*

The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment numerical reasoning and Fifth Year summer maths	0.50	136	6.733	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Fifth Year February, English	0.60	136	8.746	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Fifth Year February, Irish	0.46	136	6.042	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment numerical reasoning and Fifth Year February, maths	0.55	136	7.680	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Fifth Year Christmas English	0.46	136	6.042	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Fifth Year Christmas, Irish	0.38	136	4.791	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment numerical reasoning and Fifth Year Christmas maths	0.59	136	6.555	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Junior Certificate English	0.58	136	8.303	0.000*

The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Junior Certificate Irish	0.50	136	6.733	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment numerical reasoning and Junior Certificate maths	0.68	136	10.816	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Junior Certificate Mocks English	0.50	136	6.733	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Junior Certificate mocks Irish	0.49	136	6.555	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment numerical reasoning and Junior Certificate mocks, maths	0.70	136	11.431	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Junior Certificate Christmas, English	0.57	136	8.090	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Junior Certificate Christmas, Irish	0.51	136	6.914	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment numerical reasoning and Junior Certificate Christmas, maths	0.57	136	8.090	0.000*

The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Second Year summer, English	0.62	136	9.215	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Second Year summer, Irish	0.62	136	9.215	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment numerical reasoning and Second Year summer, maths	0.56	136	7.882	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Second Year Christmas, English	0.55	136	7.680	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and Second Year Christmas, Irish	0.49	136	6.555	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment numerical reasoning and Second Year Christmas, maths	0.62	136	9.215	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and First Year summer English	0.59	136	8.521	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and First Year summer Irish	0.58	136	8.303	0.000*

The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment numerical reasoning and First Year summer, maths	0.64	136	9.714	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and First Year February, English	0.64	136	9.714	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and First Year February, Irish	0.34	136	4.216	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment numerical reasoning and First Year February, maths	0.69	136	11.117	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and First Year Christmas, English	0.55	136	7.680	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment verbal reasoning and First Year Christmas, Irish	0.52	136	7.099	0.000*
The correlation between the CAT4 Entrance assessment numerical reasoning and First Year Christmas, maths	0.74	136	12.830	0.000*

Additional statistical information associated with Table 31 (Chapter Six)

Description	*r*-value	Degrees of freedom (DF)	Test Statistics (T) (2 tailed)	*p*-value (2 tailed)
Mean correlation between CAT4 assessment and First Year Christmas assessment	0.78	136	14.536	0.000*
Mean correlation between CAT4 assessment and First Year February assessment	0.77	136	14.074	0.000*
Mean correlation between CAT4 and First Year Summer assessment	0.74	136	12.830	0.000*
Mean correlation between CAT4 and Second Year Christmas assessment	0.68	136	10.816	0.000*
Mean correlation between CAT4 and Second Year Summer assessment	0.74	136	12.830	0.000*
Mean correlation between CAT4 and Junior Cert Christmas assessment	0.66	136	10.245	0.000*
Mean correlation between CAT4 and Junior Certificate Mock assessment	0.73	136	12.456	0.000*
Mean correlation between CAT4 and Junior Certificate assessment	0.76	136	13.637	0.000*
Mean correlation between CAT4 and Fifth Year Christmas assessment	0.69	136	11.117	0.000*
Mean correlation between CAT4 assessment and Fifth Year February assessment	0.65	136	9.975	0.000*
Mean correlation between CAT4 and Fifth Year Summer assessment	0.66	136	10.245	0.000*

Mean correlation between CAT4 and Sixth Year Christmas assessment	0.68	136	10.816	0.000*
Mean correlation between CAT4 and Leaving Certificate Mock assessment	0.66	136	10.245	0.000*
Mean correlation between CAT4 and Leaving Certificate assessment	0.34	136	4.216	0.000*

Appendix I: Survey instrument (parent)

Dear Parent,

Thank you for agreeing to complete this survey. Please only complete the survey if you have read the 'plain language statement' and signed a consent form to the researcher.

This survey should take approximately ten minutes to complete.

Remember, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers here. It is YOUR OPINION that matters.

Thank you for taking part in this research.

Carol Guildea

(Researcher)

This survey asks about your beliefs and understandings about ASSESSMENT, whatever that term means to you.

Please answer the questions using YOUR OWN understanding of assessment.

Part 1: When I think about ASSESSMENT these are the kinds of activities I have in mind (*Tick all that apply)*

☐Written class tests
☐ Oral Question & Answer
☐ Observation by the teacher
☐ All Student Written Work that is corrected
☐ Homework
☐State Exams
☐School Exams
☐Oral work with the teacher
☐When a student assesses themselves
☐ Portfolio / Scrapbook
☐ Standardised Test
☐ Essay Test

Part 2: Please give your rating for each of the following statements based on **YOUR** opinion about assessment. Indicate how much you actually agree or disagree with each statement. Use the following rating scale and choose the one response that comes closest to describing your opinion.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Indifferent
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Statement	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Indifferent**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
Teachers assess students so they can write reports for parents					
Teachers are over-assessing					
Assessment makes my child responsible for their learning					
Assessment interferes with teaching					
Assessment results are filed & ignored					
Assessment is important for future opportunities					
Assessment tells future employers how capable my child is					

Goalsetting by teachers using past assessments would be helpful					
Assessment results predict my child's future assessment results					
Assessment helps teachers track student progress					
Assessment results are not always accurate					
Assessment is unfair to students					
Students who do badly in assessments only have themselves to blame					
Assessment provides feedback to students about their performance					
Assessment results can be depended on					
The CBA is a student friendly addition to assessment					
Teachers assess students so they can write reports for parents					
Teachers are over-assessing					
Assessment is an engaging and enjoyable experience for my child					

Assessment improves the atmosphere in my child's class					
Assessment results are trustworthy					
Assessment results are important to show how much my child has learned					
Assessment provides information on how well schools are doing					
Assessment is a way to determine how much my child has learned					

Part 3: How did the following assessments make you feel

Assessment	**Not Nervous at all**	**A little Nervous**	**Extremely Nervous**
Classroom based assessment (CBA)			
Leaving Certificate Assessment			

Part 4:

What is your highest level of education ? (*Tick one only)*

❒ Junior Certificate

❒ Leaving Certificate

❒ Undergraduate Degree

❒ Postgraduate Degree

❒ Other (please specify) _____

Part 5: Any other comments / reflections are very welcome:

Appendix J: Survey instrument (students)

Dear Student,

Thank you for agreeing to complete this survey. Please only complete the survey if you have read the 'plain language statement' and signed a consent form (signed by your parents) to the researcher.

This survey and should take approximately ten minutes to complete.

Remember, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers here. It is YOUR OPINION that matters.

Thank you for taking part in this research.

Carol Guildea

(Researcher)

This survey asks about your beliefs and understandings about ASSESSMENT, whatever that term means to you.

Please answer the questions using YOUR OWN understanding of assessment.

Part 1: When I think about ASSESSMENT these are the kinds of activities I have in mind (*Tick all that apply)*

☐Written class tests
☐ Oral Question & Answer
☐ Observation by the teacher
☐ All Student Written Work that is corrected
☐ Homework
☐State Exams
☐School Exams
☐Oral work with the teacher
☐When a student assesses themselves
☐ Portfolio / Scrapbook
☐ Standardised Test
☐ Essay Test

Part 2: Please give your rating for each of the following statements based on **YOUR** opinion about assessment. Indicate how much you actually agree or disagree with each statement. Use the following rating scale and choose the one response that comes closest to describing your opinion.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Statement	**Strongly Disagree**	**Disagree**	**Indifferent**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**
Teachers assess students so they can write reports for parents					
Teachers are over-assessing					
Assessment makes me responsible for my learning					
Assessment interferes with teaching					
Assessment results are filed & ignored					
Assessment is important for future opportunities					
Assessment tells future employers how capable I am					
Goalsetting by teachers using past assessments would be helpful					
Assessment results predict my future assessment results					
Assessment helps teachers track student progress					

Assessment results are not always accurate					
Assessment is unfair to students					
Students who do badly in assessments only have themselves to blame					
The CBA is a student friendly addition to assessment					
Assessment provides feedback to students about their performance					
Assessment results can be depended on					
Assessment improves the atmosphere in my class					
Assessment results are trustworthy					
Assessment results are important to show how much I have learned					
Assessment provides information on how well schools are doing					
Assessment is a way to determine how much students have learned					

Part 3: How did the following assessments make you feel

Assessment	**Not Nervous at all**	**A little Nervous**	**Extremely Nervous**
Classroom based assessment (CBA)			
Leaving Certificate Assessment			

Part 4:

What is your mother's highest level of education ? (*Tick one only)*

❒ Junior Certificate

❒ Leaving Certificate

❒ Undergraduate Degree

❒ Postgraduate Degree

❒ Other (please specify) _____

What is your father's highest level of education ? (*Tick one only)*

❒ Junior Certificate

❒ Leaving Certificate

❒ Undergraduate Degree

❒ Postgraduate Degree

❒ Other (please specify) _____

Part 5:

Any other comment / reflection are very welcome: